

AND THE SEA LOOKED : A NOVEL IN THE MAKING

by

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The dissertation "And the Sea Looked : A Novel in the Making" is an exploration of the creative process of a prose fiction novel called 'And the Sea Looked'. Following the lives of three women, the novel reflects on the idea that universal Peace (the end of all wars) will only be possible if individuals, through the power of their choices in the way they live their ordinary lives, strive to transcend the separations and imperfections of the Material World, ultimately finding a universal unity ("oneness") in the ideal love existing in Plato's superior, Divine World. The psychological creative process behind the making of the novel is investigated in-depth and a short critical interpretation of the novel is included.

DECLARATION

I declare that **And The Sea Looked: A Novel in the Making** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Judy-Ann Croome

June 2007

DEDICATION

For Beric Croome

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PART A

"And the Sea Looked"

A Novel

AND THE SEA LOOKED

by

Ann Victor

*En somme, trois choses demeurent: la foi, l'espérance et l'amour,
mais la plus grande d'entre elles, c'est l'amour.*

*And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three;
but the greatest of these is charity.*

1 Corinthians 13: 13

La Bible du Semeur and King James Bible

CHAPTER ONE

CATHY

The Present

I first see the crucifix. Sad and crushed, the Christ-figure hangs immolated on the heavy cross, his wooden face calling to me in its eternal suffering.

'Come this way,' Father Murray says. 'I'll introduce you to the others.'

This is the moment I always fear. I sigh, and glance up at the dead eyes of my Saviour. Will I again join him on his cross of suffering? Or will this time be different?

In reality, I'm an atheist, for when has God ever been there for me? Today, however, as I pass by the poignant symbol of hope to so many - once, even myself - I lift my hand in an almost-forgotten gesture. After making the sign of the cross, I turn and follow the portly priest into the Parish office.

'Elizabeth,' he calls to the blonde woman standing in the corner by a half-empty water-cooler. 'Where's Ted?'

'In the garden,' she says, her eyes still on the cup she's filling with the pure, clean water, thankfully delaying the moment of my truth. 'Shall I fetch him?'

She looks up at last and I hold my breath, waiting. When her shock slips away into civility, I breathe again.

I'm used to that reaction - I can deal with it. It's when children scream aloud, or their parents damn me as the Devil, that I find myself hating the colourless skin and transparent hair my albinism has cursed me with.

She recovers quickly, and idly tucks a loose strand back into the neat, rather old fashioned bun she's secured her hair in. 'Hello,' she says, standing up and walking towards me, 'and welcome to the Chapel of St Jerome.'

My admiration for her springs to life when, with almost no hesitation, she holds out her hand. I take it. She meets my intent gaze, distorted by the thick lenses of my spectacles, with an easy smile.

'I'm Elizabeth Johnson.' She laughs happily and waggles her fingers, showing me a ring nestled safely on the third finger of her left hand. 'Soon to be Elizabeth Templeton!' She waves in the vague direction of the window.

'Ted is happiest in his garden,' she says, 'but I'll take you to meet him later.'

I guess the blonde is the same age as me, perhaps slightly older, or that could be the effect of the strand of

pearls, a lustrous cream against the pale lemon jersey she's teamed with a conservative knee-length navy skirt.

'I'm Catherine,' I announce more harshly than I'd intended in the sudden, awkward silence. Or does my voice still hold the sullen resentment I've suppressed for years? I add quickly, 'Most people call me Cathy.'

A smile lights Elizabeth's face, chasing away the middle-class blandness. 'We've got something in common!'

She laughs at the blank stare I give her. 'We're both named after powerful queens!' she says.

It's as if the discovery forges an invisible bond between us. Once as dead as the ashes of my childhood, hope now quivers. Maybe, I allow myself to dream; maybe I've found a friend.

A smile curves a tentative journey around my lips as Elizabeth lays a gentle hand on my arm. It's been so long since anyone other than my doctor's cool professionalism touched me, her fingers burn through my blouse.

'This is your desk.' She pulls me over to a corner, leading me to a small wooden table tucked away almost out of sight, chipped and scratched with years of memories.

And the action is so ordinary, so commonplace, I can't begin to imagine how it will change my life.

CHAPTER TWO

ELIZABETH

The Present

When Father Elisha Murray tells her about the call from Noah, Elizabeth can't begin to imagine how her life will change. NOAH - what a ridiculous acronym for the National Organisation of Albinism Health, she decides.

Noah always sticks in her mind as a gentle old soul. She pictures a saintly, bearded fellow cuddling a dove in his warm, safe hands as the relentless waters rise and rise and rise. Is he ever afraid of drowning? Sometimes, when her emotions slap against the edges of her self-control, she knows how Noah must have felt, so outwardly calm as he watched the sinners cry out in remorse as they sank beneath the waters of the flood.

Today, Elizabeth is proud of herself. Her control holds fast, although the fault line in her discipline trembles dangerously.

'The albino woman started work today,' she tells Clyve.

A turning page answers her, so she speaks louder, over the continuing rustle. 'Ted never came in, though. He must be afraid of her.'

Her fiancé still doesn't lift his head from the newspaper he's reading. 'Uh-huh.'

'I tried to make her feel welcome. Not so...abnormal.'

'Did you succeed?'

It's his way to appear more interested in his paper. "Crisis Grows as Northern War Crosses Border" reports the headline, and Clyve, ever anxious about his helplessness to stop it, devours every word.

She continues anyway. 'I said we both have the names of great queens.'

'She liked that?'

'Oh, yes!' Elizabeth's eyes light up to a pale green. 'I was glad to help,' she adds as an afterthought.

'You always are.'

'I am. Aren't I?'

Neither statement nor question, she doesn't like the vulnerability it shows. She stands up and, briskly smoothing the creases from her skirt, hides the cracks in her confidence behind a firm, 'Of course I am!'

She leaves Clyve alone with his paper and, in the voluminous entrance hall, Elizabeth pauses by the mahogany cupboard she collected earlier from Granny May. Touching the

wood, glossy from years of lavender polish carefully smoothed into the dark grain, she remembers her uncomfortable afternoon with the old woman.

'My dear Harry gave it to me,' Clyve's grandmother, smelling of wintergreen and antiseptic, said to Elizabeth, as she walked into her cottage. 'When we first married.'

A gnarled hand trembled over the dark sheen of wood, both finger and door stained with age and life. 'Memories,' Clyve's grandmother whispered as she hooked the dust out of this nick and smoothed a palm over that scratch. 'Always, the memories are here.'

Elizabeth knew the old woman wanted to talk, to go back in time as she often did, for yesterday was so much more alive to her than today. For a brief, tempting moment Elizabeth considered being truthful. What would happen if she told the old lady she'd only come to collect the cupboard? To admire it as it became hers. To dream of the memories she would make with it; nicks and cuts with honest meaning.

Then the expectations kicked in. All she could possibly do was help the old woman back to her chair and let her ramble on. Elizabeth, placing her handbag on the closest table, dismissed the removal men she'd hired. 'Wait for me outside,' she said. 'I'll call you when I need you.'

Before turning back to Clyve's grandmother, she grimaced. She'd heard all the stories before, but she asked anyway. 'Are they good memories, Granny May?'

'Some are.'

Granny May nodded vaguely, as if trying to gather her thoughts, and Elizabeth remembered the velvet dog her father had placed in his car. However carefully Father manoeuvred the wheel, every little bump set the dog's head bouncing up and down. It would bob frantically until weaving to a stop before Father, despite his rigid hold on the wheel, again misjudged a bump, lurching the dog's head into another flurry of movement. In almost the same way, Granny May's grey head stilled on her thin, bony chest, once a pert and attractive bosom, before the cancer took first one breast and then the other.

Elizabeth began to wonder if the old woman had fallen asleep. Relieved because she'd escape the memories, but she was also annoyed because she wouldn't be able to collect the cupboard. Another wasted afternoon. The comforting weight of her engagement ring - a weight she wasn't used to yet - reminded her of all she must still do: the invitations, the caterers. Her dress; a million other touches to make her wedding day extraordinary.

Like all brides-to-be before her and yet to come, she wanted her wedding day special. No, more than special, she wanted it perfect. Now, instead of planning her dream day,

here she was, waiting with stoic patience, for an old woman to awaken.

Sighing, Elizabeth reached for her belongings. As the small grey head slumped against the chair, framed by the minutiae of a life lived in another time, Elizabeth, for some reason, thought of the albino woman. Would she ever marry? Did she want a husband and children? What man could possibly find her attractive enough to touch her as tenderly as Elizabeth let Clyve's hands stroke over her, in those moments when some dark and passionate demon sprang to life in her breast? She keeps that particular beast caged, with the same strength of will she uses on anything that disturbs the even keel of her emotions.

'Memories...' The old woman, awake again, gave a laugh, or - Elizabeth can't afterwards remember - a sob, jolting her out of her thoughts so she forgot the aberrant creature she'd met earlier in the day. 'Memories,' the old woman murmured, 'are what you make them.'

Elizabeth turned to Granny May, her surprise, she was sure, clear even to the old lady's dim eyesight.

'Sit down, sit down,' Granny May ordered irascibly. 'You're not escaping yet.'

'I...I...didn't want to escape.'

Granny May grunted inelegantly, before falling silent again. Just as Elizabeth thought she couldn't bear it any

longer, the old woman shifted straighter, leaning back against the hard wings of the chair.

It was difficult to tell which was older, Elizabeth thought peevishly, and almost as impossible to tell which was the animate being.

'Be careful, Elizabeth.'

Loud in the dusty silence, Elizabeth wasn't, at first, sure she'd heard correctly. 'Of what, Granny May?'

'Memories, child, memories...'

She waited, and waited some more, but the old woman drifted off into sleep, or a place where she couldn't follow. This wasn't going to end anytime soon. Elizabeth sneaked a glance at her watch - a beautiful Rolex, gold with a single diamond in place of the Roman numeral XII, a gift from Clyve on her last birthday - and hoped the removal men wouldn't leave.

'Time...there's never enough time to say sorry.'

An echo of pain, barely audible in the old, quavering voice, brushed into life some emotion in Elizabeth, making her lean forward and touch the old woman's arm sympathetically.

'Eighty-five years is a long time, Granny May,' she said bracingly. 'You've had so much more time than most people.'

'It's never enough, never enough. The memories are too many.'

'But it's good to have memories.' A fleeting smile turned the edges of her mouth up. 'I want to make memories with

Clyve.' Her voice dropped a notch. 'Memories and friends and children.' She felt a lick of heat along her veins and quickly thought of safer matters. 'Doing together what will make us a happy family.' A perfect family, she added to herself. 'Those will be good memories.'

'There'll be other memories. The ones etched onto your soul with a blunt blade. The ones you'll wish you never made.'

'I don't think so, Granny May.'

She laughed, half genuinely. Elizabeth never regretted what she did. Every word, every action, she evaluated in her own mind, checking her inner benchmark: the living word of Jesus. The world, she believed, would be a better place if more people did the same. All it needed was self-discipline. Then, like buried treasures, one could haul out all the memories, and fondly review them when one reached Granny May's great age.

'Don't be so sure, child, you're not always in control of your memories.'

'If not me, who then?'

'Fate.'

'Oh, Granny May!' Elizabeth gave a queer little laugh. 'There is no Fate.' But she allowed for a mind trained in a time when humanity was far more naïve than it is today. 'There's only God. He gave us free will. We can choose what we do.'

'God, Fate - it's all the same to me.' Petulance slurred the words, but the old woman's eyes were surprisingly bright with challenge. 'And what do you know of free will, child? Your life has hardly begun. You're not yet fully acquainted with suffering.'

The hovering pain came alive, clenching inside Elizabeth, and the poison almost spewed out of her mouth. She managed to tamp it down, crush it back into the cellars in her mind. Had Granny May forgotten her background?

It was control over her emotions - her tight discipline over every wayward thought, over every self-pitying idea struggling to take root in the damp fertile blackness of her unconscious - that made her succeed in lifting herself higher than she'd ever dreamed.

From the time she'd learned the name of the demon living inside her Father; the one that eclipsed him, she decided she'd never lose control. Never. She'd master herself, and her baser urges, in a way Father never did.

Dignity, and self-control, would be the bricks she'd use to build her safe place; a beautiful place where fear and ambiguity, shame and uncertainty, would not crush a person's soul. There, she'd wipe out the ugly memories of her other Father, the one who, on the way home from his Friday evening

meetings, slaughtered her real Father with a sharp smell she learned to recognise as the demon called alcohol.

As they heard him slide the key with careful precision into the lock, Mama would shoo the younger children to their beds. Then, sharing nervous glances, the two of them would wait for whichever Father came through the door.

He was always the same, large and bald, his grey suit as immaculate as when he left home in the morning. But his eyes, the same pale green that stared back at Elizabeth from her mirror each morning, gave him away. When his demon ruled, they weren't the eyes of the big, bluff man who made her laugh, or told her she was his poppet. They burned right through her, judgement carving its lesson into her bosom as, in obedience to his demand, she sidled towards him.

'What's this?' he'd ask, pointing to her shoes, dusty from the walk home from school. He'd want to sound stern, but his lips would let him down. 'Haven't I taught you better?' he'd say, concentrating so hard on forming each word with lips too loose to shape words, that his eyes - those eyes that were his, but not his - would turn inward, away from her, but not for long enough. As soon as he'd found the secret place he was searching for, he'd add, 'A Johnson never goes out with dirty shoes,' and he'd straighten his tie, and his spine, before saying, 'A Johnson has pride!'

'They were clean when I left home, Father,' she'd dare to whisper. 'I cleaned yours as well. Don't you remember?' she'd

add, hoping to reach the part of him that was real. There was no reasoning with the stranger who resembled her Father, but wasn't him.

Some nights she ducked in time. Others, tired before Father came home, the long night began with her already bruised.

Mama showed her how to use grown-up's make-up to hide the marks before she went to school. But the sneers, and the pitying expressions, said no-one believed her anymore when she told them she'd tripped and fallen on the way home. Again.

'What happened to your face, child?' Miss Phipps asked, one morning.

Elizabeth arrived at the school gate at the same time as the tall, middle-aged headmistress. Leaning forward, she cupped Elizabeth's chin and turned her face this way, then that, grimacing as she saw the shadows Mama's make-up couldn't hide. Elizabeth gagged, partly from nerves, but also because under the smell of Miss Phipps heavy sweet perfume, there was another smell, the same fumes that hung heavy around her Father.

'I fell,' she said, but Angela Rocco, school trend setter, walked past with her disciples and heard her.

'She's always falling, Miss Phipps,' the girl said, adding from the safety of her perfect life, 'I think she has problems at home.'

Miss Phipps frowned as the other girls tittered. Elizabeth thought she heard them, or one of the teachers, drawn by their small crowd at the school gate, call out the name of her Father's demon. 'Her father likes his whisky too much,' someone said, and she rattled out the words so the headmistress wouldn't hear those lies.

'I don't have problems at home! I fell!'

'What happened?' Miss Phipps asked, quite gently, Elizabeth thought, but Mama had said not to tell anyone. It was their secret, and no-one must ever find out, or Mama would die of shame. Elizabeth, too, because she wanted people to see only her real Father: the good one.

'I fell,' she said again, stubborn from desperation, and heard the muffled giggles as Angela contradicted her.

'You did not. Your father hits you when he's drunk.'

'What's your name, child? What really happened? You must tell me the truth. Otherwise,' Miss Phipps urged, regret lacing her words, 'I'll have to ask Angela to tell me.'

Elizabeth didn't want to meet Angela's avid stare, so she lifted her gaze high. Up past the letters that read 'St Mary's Convent for Girls', up as high as the dusty old crucifix adorning the arched gate. The Christ-figure grimaced in a suffering that echoed the ache in Elizabeth's muscles. And the iron face, blurring with tears she would not to let fall, somehow gave her a strength she didn't realise she had. 'I'm

Elizabeth Johnson,' she said evenly, 'And I tripped on the way home from school yesterday.'

The ripple of response from Angela and her friends reached out like the breath of something dark and dangerous, lurking beneath the ordinariness of their faces. Elizabeth simply held her gaze on that suffering face and, as she watched, the sun came over the roof of the school hall. Glinting off the dew clinging to the Christ, it warmed her. Please, she prayed to the iridescent figure, please let them leave me alone.

As if she heard the silent prayer, Miss Phipps turned to the small crowd that had slowly gathered around them. 'Leave now, everyone,' she ordered. 'I'll deal with this.'

'But, Miss Phipps...'

'Go, Angela.' No-one argued with the headmistress when she spoke in that tone.

When they were alone, Miss Phipps was quiet for a long while. Then, 'Elizabeth,' she said. 'Your Father and I go to the same meetings.'

Elizabeth still didn't move her eyes away from the crucifix. 'My Father is a good man,' she said.

'Of course he is.' The headmistress sighed heavily and then touched a finger to Elizabeth's bruised cheek. 'Be careful, child. Our demons ruin the best of us.'

She left Elizabeth there, alone, staring at the miracle of the crucifix.

Shame had again shredded her soul on that day, and yet the kindness that came from an answered prayer had put it back together. Dazed, and a little awed, Elizabeth floated through the arched gate, fresh life breathed into her by that glowing cross, and she made two decisions.

Through her own will - and with her newly discovered faith in the Jesus she'd found - she'd escape the trap her genetic heritage had placed her in, never letting her father's demons take root in her life. And she would always be kind to those people who, like her, were constantly stung by the pious malevolence of the Angela Roccas of this world.

So Granny May's words were a joke. To say she, who had suffered so much, didn't understand suffering? To say she, who had made a new life far away from anyone who remembered Sam Johnson liking his alcohol too much, or the bruises barely covered by Mama's make-up, was not in control of her own memories....! The old woman had lived too comfortable a life.

'I've suffered.' She could explain her pain in no other way. 'When you're different, people can be cruel.'

'Elizabeth, child, you don't suffer from what other people do to you. Real suffering comes from what you do to others.'

She wasn't going to argue with the irrationality of senility. So all Elizabeth said was, 'Of course, Granny May,'

even though she didn't agree. No one chose to experience the pain she'd felt. No normal, average person, that is, and Elizabeth was, finally, both average and normal. After years of hard work, Elizabeth now almost blended in with the people she'd been so envious of, the ones like Angela Rocco with her perfect, normal life.

For soon, very soon, Elizabeth Johnson, daughter of drunken Sam, would cease to exist. She would become Mrs Elizabeth Templeton, wife of Clyve, and an impeccable person.

'You don't believe me.' Granny May cackled loudly. 'You'll see, Elizabeth, you'll see...memories...the memories will make you find the truth. Take the cupboard,' she added with a sigh, 'and go. I'm tired.'

Much to Elizabeth's relief, the old woman was asleep when she returned with the removal men. They grumbled quietly, not wanting to wake her, and Elizabeth heard their voices get louder as they reached the truck, loading the heavy piece of furniture.

The soft buzz of Granny May's snores filled the room, and the air changed, settling oddly around them. Elizabeth shuddered, wanting to leave - free, at last, to leave, for she had her cupboard and the old woman no longer had any interest in her. But the echo of Granny May's last words trapped her.

They held her fast with the truth that her memories stained her with a shame that should have been her Father's alone. His demon was her inheritance, a memory that would live

on in the shadows of her soul for her whole life. Perhaps even beyond this life, she sometimes thought, when the burden became too much, and she almost sank beneath the sea of her memories, waves of shame endlessly eroding her will.

But, unlike Father, she fought her weakness. With every breath she drew, with her every act of charity, she still fought it.

Like being friendly to the albino woman today. Whatever happens she'll always treat the poor albino with kindness.

Granny May's bizarre ramblings from this afternoon still ring dully in her mind, rattling around like a raven, black as her night time dreams. A harbinger of a message remaining just beyond the grasp of her understanding. So full of depravity, so full of death, it freezes her with a fear that sets a dull headache throbbing behind her eyes, as if the raven is pick, pick, picking them out.

The day has frayed the edges of her control. First the albino, then the visit to Granny May's, and now Clyde - more interested in his paper than he is in her - all scratching at her old scars, picking away at the carapace she's built over them, leaving her restless, and somehow unclean. But her discipline never fails her.

Touching a white rose in the arrangement she's placed in the centre of the dinner table, she murmurs a brief prayer,

allowing the glorious riot of fragrance to soothe her. And, when the storm of feeling has finally quietened beneath the weight of her faith, she clips a smile to her face and calls Clyve to join her.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

MAY

The Past, fifty years ago

The glorious riot of fragrance wafting up from the arrangement in the centre of the dinner table fails to soothe me. I force the storm of feeling back into nothingness. When I'm calm again, I call for a servant.

'Ma'am May called?' Beulah sidles into the formal dining room, her eyes, as always, locked to the floor. Does she think I can't see the fear rimming them with white? I'm pleased. For, when she fears me, I'm in control; there is no carnage to subdue. 'Ma'am called?' she says again.

'What did I say about the roses?' I give her my glare, the one I practise by drawing my eyebrows down to meet over my nose. It makes me look formidable and I'm pleased it has the effect I desire. Beulah shuffles her feet nervously and I wait a single beat before I add, 'Have you no ears?'

Silence. I can almost hear the frantic scurrying of her mind as she mentally runs back through the orders of this morning. I help her out. 'White roses, Beulah. I wanted white roses.'

Her head sinks lower. If she'd been a white woman, she would've blushed with nerves. I deepen my frown, to prevent my own nervousness from showing for, even after sixteen years as a Templeton wife, I'm still not used to having servants do my bidding. 'Well?'

'Ma'am, sorry, Ma'am.'

'Sorry doesn't get the job done. Get them away.' I wave a hand languidly, another gesture I practise when Harry's left for his pharmacy.

Some call him ruthless, but I'm proud of his ambition. Currently he's working on expanding the family's pharmacy into a nationwide chain of stores. Three blocks down, old Mr Reubens complains that since Harry took over his father's store, his pharmacy has been losing business. Harry's father, he says, didn't poach his customers with discount prices and special offers. They each respected each other's turf, and there were customers enough for both of them.

When he first came to complain, over a year ago, Harry waited for my nod and then, smiling, offered to buy him out.

'He'll sell soon,' I say to Harry every night, and he believes me.

Harry works hard. Between his business, and his visits to his mother, I hardly see him. These days, she's so often on her sickbed - deathbed, I sometimes hope, before I push the thought away. People tell me she's a lovely woman, and sometimes I guess she is. It's only...I can't help thinking: when she dies, I'll be the family matriarch. The power behind the Templeton empire Harry is busy building with every new store he opens.

Beulah stands there, tense and anxious, as I lose myself in my future. 'Go,' I say eventually, releasing her. 'Bring the white roses.'

I watch her escape from the room, the sympathetic cry of a child echoing inside my heart, reflecting the fear on her face. But I can show her no weakness; for if I did, what will I do when Mayflower comes again? So I dismiss them both - servant and the memory of a child long dead - from my thoughts, and begin to set the table with the fine china and heavy silver cutlery I take from the cupboard, the mahogany polished to a glossy sheen. It stands solid and enduring in the dining room. Only I carry the key to it; it keeps my most precious possessions safe from harm. Harry gave it to me years ago, when I told him it was what I wanted.

With a last few careful finishes, I stand back to check the table, lacking only the roses. Next to the seat I always use I've placed the silver sugar shaker.

'It's been in our family for over a hundred years,' Harry's mother said when she gave the shaker to me.

The thought of tracing a family tree back through the centuries diminished me. But then I reminded myself The Wars changed everything, even the old ways, and now the daughters of poor men can also be rich and powerful.

'I'll treasure it,' I promised, not lifting my eyes from the glittering object.

She just smiled and, without a hint of reluctance, pressed it into my hands. And so the silver sugar shaker is now mine.

I check the "Woman's Home" magazine I bought, showing the ideal layout of an elegant afternoon tea. Lacking only the white roses, my table exactly replicates the photograph. Yet it's off balance; the crockery and cutlery uncomfortable in their settings, until I move the sugar shaker closer to the head of the table, and smile. With a reverence I can't help, I stroke a finger over the intricate engraving, the beauty of it, as always, drowning out the muted cry of my childhood, asking me if it's worth what I pay.

I confirm the time. Small and delicate, my watch is another gift from Harry's mother, as if she knew of all the

years my soul longed for such finery as I travelled with Daddy from one dull, dusty town to another.

It's late - nearly two o'clock - and Harry's bringing his mother home for tea today. That's why I'm using the best china, and why I want the white roses to complete the table. But the servant is still not back.

'Beulah!' I call. Receiving no answer, I move with careful grace into the entrance hall. The double entrance doors open out onto a veranda shadowed by an intricate Dutch Gable roof. She's in the rose garden, at the bottom of the sweeping driveway, staring at the sea spread out in the bay beneath us, taking her time, giving no thought to completing the task I set her.

It's undignified to shout, so I walk down the veranda staircase. 'Elijah,' I say.

The ancient, energetically cleaning the old black Rolls Harry's grandfather left us when he died, stops working and tilts his head in response. I love that car, and pat its bonnet, as though it's some well-loved pet.

'Tell Beulah to hurry up.'

'Yes, Ma'am,' he says, throwing the damp sponge into the pail of water. He's as old as the Rolls, almost another heirloom, and moves slowly down the driveway.

The wind from the bay, brushed with salt, carries his voice back to me. 'Ma'am says hurry up, quick, quick! The Master is coming.'

Beulah's arm jerks as she sees me standing there. Then the ocean-monster called Mayflower rumbles ominously in my depths, twisting and moving inside me. And, as Beulah almost stumbles in her haste to bring me the roses, I sigh to release my unease.

I take the flowers and, as a car pulls up to the front porch, I finish the last arrangement. Forcing myself to slow down - I don't want it to appear as if I've gone to any special effort - I take my time, arriving in the hall as Harry helps his mother through the door.

She's well today, although she's leaning heavily on her cane.

'Hello, May dear,' she says, lifting her face. Dutifully I bend and kiss her cheek.

'You're looking fine today, Grace. Did you sleep well?'

'I had the dreams again.'

Grumpily she moves past me, heading unerringly for the drawing room. No surprise, that, as she lived here for forty-five years, until Harry snr died. Then we moved in, and she moved to a small cottage, in one of the newer areas, almost as prestigious as this suburb.

Behind her, Harry rolls his eyes. He's offered to make her a sleeping draught, but she constantly refuses, so I understand his impatience. Then he moves forward, dabbing a peck of greeting on my mouth. It's then I see the outlander for the first time.

'One of Mother's strays,' Harry whispers in my ear.

Since Harry snr died, Grace gives free board and lodging to single women from the church. Young Father Murray, the new parish priest just arrived from the seminary and full of youthful zeal, sends them to her. From the country, the women are usually homely, often coarse and bluff.

'Stay,' Grace says to them. 'Just until you find your way around the city.'

They stay, and she works miracles. Some of the women are even attractive when they leave her and, although she never says, I'm sure it's Grace who buys their new clothes. With Templeton money.

'This is Enoch...I'm sorry, I've forgotten your surname?' Harry says.

'Enoch will do,' the unknown man answers, and I see him properly for the first time.

He's tall, and lean, so lean he's almost elongated. Fine boned and fine featured, he's not a parochial. Not his voice, and not in the simple black suit he wears with casual dignity. My mother-in-law doesn't normally agree to house single men, so he's an anomaly. One I don't like at all. I'm not even surprised to see the faint blue outline of faded tattoos on his fingers. L-O-V-E spells the one hand; P-E-A-C-E on the other. The blue letters dance into one another and I don't know why suddenly I can't breathe.

'Why are you staying at Grace's?' I gasp, and sense Harry's surprise. It's a long time since I've been that gauche.

'I don't think that's your business, dear,' Grace says. Her quiet voice carries from the dining room door, where she's stopped, unnoticed in my unwilling fascination for her latest boarder.

'No problem, Mrs T.' He steps close to me, offering a long, delicate hand for me to shake. L-O-V-E it says, and I can't look away. 'I'm staying,' he says with a half-smile, 'because I must.'

With those hands, perhaps he's a pianist, unable to find employment in a city overflowing with artists who feed themselves lies as they dream of a fame that'll never come.

'I'm a scribe,' he says, as if reading my mind.

I jerk my eyes away from the incongruous elegance of his tattooed hands. Embarrassed that he saw me staring, the faint heat in my cheeks gets hotter. 'Interesting,' I say in my most bored tone. 'And what does a scribe do?'

'I write.'

'Oh? What?'

'Deeds. I write about men and their deeds.'

'Aaah, an historian,' I say, the solidness of the word somehow making me feel safe.

'Of a sort,' he answers, and smiles.

His smile strips my soul bare. I want to think it holds a hint of malevolence, to explain my heart's unease. But it's too serene, too understanding, to be evil. And the goodness in that smile calls to Mayflower. Can he see her sleeping in the darkness? The thought scares me more than any amount of wickedness can.

'You feel you're able to record the deeds of nations?' I ask, and let my gaze drift over him with subtle disdain: a good trick, I've found, to keep people away.

'Sometimes,' he says, small crinkles forming at the corners of his eyes as his smile deepens, 'but mostly I record the small sins of the heart.'

I curve an eyebrow upward; it's all I can do as my own heart is pounding too loud and too fast for me to think coherently. How can he conceive Mayflower's existence? I comfort myself that I've kept her too well concealed. But I find myself blurting out my fear anyway. 'Like what?' I sneer. 'What trivial human thoughts can be so riveting that they're worth recording over the great tragedies and triumphs of nations?'

He looks at me steadily, with eyes that swirl around me. I feel faint. Harry disappears, and Grace too, until it's just me and him. I fall into his eyes, his soul, and I see what he sees: a burden almost too great for him to carry, the pain of mankind's petty evils weighing him down until he almost loses all hope.

Almost, for he remembers, and - because I see through his eyes - in some part of me that is drowning, I, too, can remember the long-ago tale of the innkeeper's wife...

...a surprising woman. Sharp-tongued and equally sharp faced, brave men fear her. And yet, it was she - not those courageous only in their words - who hid the old crone, the healer woman. She swept the old crone from beneath the noses of the torch-bearing mob screeching, 'Burn the witch! Burn the witch!'

Emptying the chamber-pots of her guests, she'd stumbled across the poor terrified creature hiding amongst the roses, with a face as white as their frozen petals. Without hesitation, acting on her heart's voice, the innkeeper's wife pushed the old woman into her hayloft and rushed to join the mob, her sharp tongue goading them, leading them, to the other end of the village. Later, she gave them mulled wine to console their loss of entertainment, and to warm them as the fire from the burning stake would have chased away the winter chill.

She waited and, when the last of them staggered home, she took bread, and a little wine, wrapped them in a warm coat and gave them to the hunted one. Then she crossed herself, and prayed to the Master to keep the wretched woman safe. The Master heard, and the stranger saw.

And what he saw, the scribe recorded...

A promise of hope that Mayflower wants too hard to believe in, until I gasp with the shock and realise that I don't like this man who calls himself a scribe, I just don't trust him. He's not one of us. I return his smile with a stony regard, and he bends his head, breaking my gaze. At first, I feel victorious, thinking I've put him in his proper place. But then, as he pats his pockets, he's still smiling.

I turn my back on him and Harry, who is here with me again. I walk to join Grace, my heels clacking my annoyance on the marble floor. No one else has marble like it; when we renovated the house two years ago, we imported it especially from Italy.

Grace mourned the loss of the original wooden floors for a while, but even she agrees that fashions change and, now The War is over, it's better to renovate the house in a modern style. 'Efficient,' she says when she first notices the expanse of white stone, 'perhaps a little hard.' I suspect she's talking about me, so I take it as a compliment.

I reach the door where she's standing, leaving Harry to bring the man called Enoch through. 'Come, Grace. I've made your favourite for tea today.'

'Crumpets?'

'No, coconut macaroons.' I help her into a chair, making sure she's comfortable, putting a cushion behind her back, the way she likes it, and leaving the ivory-topped cane within easy reach.

I hear the murmur of male voices come closer, one deeper than the other, drawing me into his net. But, with a glance at the mahogany cupboard to ensure that my most precious possessions stay safely locked away, I hold steady and force an interest in what Grace is saying.

'I had the dream again last night,' she says, frowning slightly so her faded blue eyes are paler than normal.

'Ummm...'

Much as I try to ignore him, he impinges on my consciousness, blurring the meaning of the words Grace speaks. While Harry's voice is little more than a murmur, I can hear every word he says. A common man, I think, who speaks too loudly when he's nervous in the company of his betters.

'Are you listening, May?'

I start, pulled out of my grudging fascination by Grace's quaver. 'Was it the same dream?'

She nods. 'The one about the angel.'

'But that's a good dream,' I say, to calm her. Since Harry snr died she's become a bit eccentric, witnessing spirits and angels almost every time she closes her eyes. Harry says it's the digitalis; at her age, she confuses the dosage sometimes and hallucinates. Indulge her fantasies, he tells me, what harm can it do?

So I ask, 'Was it the same angel as your other dreams?'

'It was beautiful.' A smile flutters around her lips, briefly touching the wrinkles that frame her neatly made up

mouth. 'Golden light shone from his head. And from his hands and feet. Like Jesus.'

I bite back a sigh, and hope she's not getting religious. In reality, I'm an atheist - when has God ever been there for me? - but I go to church with Harry every Sunday without fail. We pick up his mother and make our way to the little stone chapel where Grace and Harry snr married.

We also married there, and I'm fond of it. After a nomadic childhood, it's enjoyable, having everyone greet me by name. 'Good morning Mrs Templeton,' they say, nodding their heads politely as we walk to the pew that Harry's family have sat in for so many years. 'Mr Templeton.' Their voices soften as they add, smiling the smile everyone uses when they meet Grace, 'Morning, Mrs T, lovely day today.' She'll nod back at them, murmuring a few words, asking after this one's sister, or that one's grandchild, as if she's genuinely interested in their ordinary lives.

But visions of Jesus? I heave another inward sigh, and apply myself to soothing her.

'It's probably your heart medication, Grace.'

'He was real!'

The presence of the stranger has sapped my patience - I'm too aware of him, here in the room with us - but from somewhere I find the strength to agree. 'If you say so.'

'Well, I do!' She glowers petulantly at me, so unlike her usual self that I glance at Harry to see if he's noticed. He's

busy showing Enoch the room - some smart new photographs of generations of Templetons past - and doesn't notice me. I'm taken aback; Harry's not one to talk easily to people.

Leaving Grace to ramble, I surreptitiously watch them. Unstyled, Enoch's hair, coal-black as the devil's wings, is too long. He uses no oil to keep it slicked neatly in place and so it falls carelessly onto his forehead.

Untidy, I think, and irresponsible. Typical of his sort. And I wonder why my heart gives a surplus little beat as he peers up and catches me staring again.

Sea eyes. He has eyes as ambiguous as the sea that looks up at me when I stand in my rose garden, the bay stretched out below. Grey, or perhaps blue, I can't drop my gaze from them. Not even when his lips move in chilling slow motion, like a nightmare, when one is calling for help, calling and calling, but no sound comes out.

'Mayflower,' I see his lips say. And they curve in a smile holding all the love in the world. I blink slowly, once, twice, and he murmurs again, 'Mayflower...'

'What?' My voice is harsh, coming from deep within me, with no pretence of politeness, or grace. Who told him what my Daddy called me? Not even Harry knows Daddy's special name for me - it's a secret, our secret and no one has called me that for years, not since Daddy went senile. I visit him in the home once a week, hoping that he'll recognise me, but it never happens.

'What did you call me?' I demand again, and Harry's eyebrows stretch his mouth into a little round 'o' of surprise.

'May!' His eyes, pale as Grace's, slide uncomfortably towards Enoch's face. Harry worries about what one should or shouldn't do in company. As do I - usually.

'He called me Mayflower,' I say, and scowl at Enoch, standing still and watchful next to my husband.

'Don't be ridiculous!' Harry bares his teeth in a parody of politeness. 'It's the heat; my wife feels it badly.'

I surge upright, as clumsy and graceless as the first time I had tea in this house, all those years ago, before the correct social etiquette became an integral part of Mrs May Templeton. 'I don't need you speaking on my behalf to him, Harold! He called me Mayflower!'

'Your flowers.' Enoch's voice is soporific. And, like two puppets under the control of a master puppeteer, Harry and I stop glaring at each other and turn to him. 'Your flowers are beautiful,' he says mildly, pointing at the white roses, still vivid with the scent of the garden. 'That's all I said.'

'My flowers?'

'They're beautiful. Do you grow them yourself?'

'Yes,' I say slowly, dazed and uncertain now. Could I have been wrong? But his face...his face tells me I wasn't and, eager to answer his call, Mayflower wakes from her dark oblivion in the ocean that is my heart.

I'm too afraid to say more and so I move across the dining room, slower even than Grace's shuffle with her cane, until I'm by the bell pull. 'It's time for tea.' I hear the echo of my voice. I'm proud that I sound like Mrs May Templeton again, all emotion leached from my words, leaving only a dignified, sharp-edged clarity to my tone.

The sharp tug I give the bell pull will bring Beulah scuttling in with the heavy silver tray, laden with the matching tea set. With that simple act, I take control again.

'He's here.' Grace's voice floats across the suddenly still room.

This time I don't even pretend to have patience. 'Deal with your mother, Harry.'

Now that I'm in control again he's vaguely uncertain, as if he's not sure what's just happened. 'Who, Mother?' Harry leaves Enoch's side and kneels next to her. The ornate decoration of the gilt chair stops him from putting his arms around her.

'The angel.' Her face is beatific, her eyes glazed with a light I can't comprehend. 'Can you feel him? Harry - May - he's here! Look!' She holds out her bony arm and there, among the wrinkles and the liver spots marking the inexorable decay of her body, gooseflesh raises the thin, grey hair scattered on her forearm. 'He's here again,' she whispers, and closes her eyes in bliss.

Harry's eyes seek mine and we're united again.

'You're dreaming again, Grace.' Overly aware of the outsider among us, I move to stand next to my husband. Enoch stands across the room, those ever-changing eyes watching us, assessing the three of us, together, a family trinity, Harry crouched next to his mother, his hand on her arm, with me standing watch over them.

Ignoring the stranger as best I can, I bend and put my arm around Grace's shoulders. 'I'll get you some tea.' I'm pleased when the dazed look in her eyes fades. 'And some cake to eat,' I add. 'You'll enjoy that.'

'Crumpets.'

'No, dear. Macaroons, your favourites.'

'Oh.' She sounds dazed again, and her eyes skitter around the room, stilling only when they land on the tall man standing so quietly and dissecting us. Why do I think he's silently judging every action I make? He has no right to judge his betters.

'Enoch,' Grace says, as delighted as a child discovering a lost toy. 'There you are.'

'I won't leave yet.'

'Good.' She nods once or twice, and rests her chin on her chest, a contented smile hovering at the corners of her lips.

'I like you, Enoch, you're a sensible man.'

'I like you too, Mrs T.' The gentleness with which he speaks makes me want to weep. Where does a man learn such

gentleness? The best Harry can do is a gruff comfort, which mortifies him, and thus discomforts me.

'Don't go yet, Enoch,' Grace says again, shaking Harry off, and holding a trembling hand out to the other man.

Holding my breath as I wait for his answer, I carefully place one macaroon on a plate, artfully arranging it next to the small silver cake fork, before leaning across to hand it to Grace.

'I won't leave yet,' he says.

The crash as I drop the plate is loud enough to make all of us jump. Murmuring a soft apology, I bend to scrape up the pieces of china and crumbs. Normally, I'd call Beulah to do it. But today I'm grateful for the opportunity it gives me to hide the turmoil provoked by a stranger's promise.

They leave about an hour later, Enoch on one side of Grace and Harry on the other. The three of them make a quaint sight. Harry, the beginnings of his middle-aged spread making him appear shorter than he is. Grace, affable as ever, but frail, clinging to the arms of her son and Enoch.

And him - Enoch, the stranger, but a stranger no longer - tall and lean, his immense height dwarfing both Grace and Harry. More than his height draws my eyes to him. There is, in the way he moves, a rhythm, a flow that tempts me.

'Enoch!' I cry, without knowing why I call to him.

'Wait!'

They stop, and stare back at me, Harry puzzled, and a little bit irritated. Grace, smiling and nodding vaguely at me.

And Enoch...Enoch stands reposed and patiently watching. Why did I call him?

'I have a gift for you,' I blurt. Another flush of heat swamps my cheeks for it's years since I acted spontaneously. I feel as giddy as the child Mayflower once was, as I run into the dining room and scoop the bunch of white roses out of their bowl.

He meets me at the top of the stairs and I stop, uncertain.

'Are those for me?' he asks, and the warm glow in his eyes gives me the courage to answer.

'For your room. Grace will have a vase in the kitchen cupboard under the stove.'

He buries his nose in their sweet fragrance. 'Thank you, little one.'

I laugh to cover the unexplained moisture in my eyes. 'You're so tall, everyone must be little to you.'

He smiles at me over the blooms, but says no more as he turns, walking back to where the others wait.

I watch them go. I hear the motor groan, then kick into life, the garden sparrows fluttering quickly to the safety of

the air. None of it touches me, until the car carrying him away disappears with a spurt of energy around the corner and out the ornate gates protecting the entrance to my mansion.

'Don't be sad, Ma'am May,' Elijah says. 'The master will come again.'

He's finished cleaning the car, and he's dressed in his chauffeur's uniform. He keeps it as clean and shiny as the old Rolls, not that he often gets to drive us anywhere. He still thinks the speed limit is under thirty and, besides, Harry prefers to drive himself in his new Ford motor car, so mostly Elijah drives Grace where she wants to go.

'I'm not sad, Elijah,' I lie, for melancholy shrouds me. How do I explain my absurd reaction to the stranger? 'Harry will be back.'

Elijah pushes himself away from where he was leaning against the Rolls, staggering a bit with old age, until he steadies himself. 'Not Master Harry, Ma'am. The other master.'

Had I feared never seeing Enoch again? The comfort I take in the old servant's words surprises me. Slowly I breathe in, and then out again, until the smell of the sea, salty and sharp, rustles through the rose garden, swirling around my nostrils and I'm calm again.

Then I walk back inside, over the threshold of the mansion that, in the years since I first met Harry jnr, has become my only real home. I stop and gaze at the bare table. Why was I so stupid? Giving Enoch the flowers. I find no

answer in the empty bowl and the unbidden tears return, overwhelming me. For once forgetting my dignity, I run helter-skelter up the stairs to lock myself in my bedroom. I'm still there when Harry returns.

And I don't come out, not even when the redemptive darkness of another night quietly descends, silencing everything but the slow, heavy thump of my heart.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

CATHY

The Present

Why did I take this job? What would I, a self-confessed atheist, want with a sleepy little church? I have no real choice. They told me Father Murray is the only person in this old seaside city willing to give me a chance. And so, when Elizabeth leaves, I'm alone again, trapped with memories as familiar to me as the hated face that stares from my mirror each morning.

After a while, I pick up the can of Brasso and rags she left with me. I have work to do, even if it's only cleaning up the stains and sorrows of other people's mess. That's not new to me and, threading my way through the pews, dull with age, I make my way to the front of the chapel. In some places, the carved initials of bored parishioners scuff the wood; in others, there are little brass plaques, which Elizabeth tells me I must shine every day.

I start with one clamped to the front pew: Grace Odette Templeton, it reads, born 1880, died 1954. There's a warmth to Grace's plaque that doesn't emanate from any of the others. 'Good afternoon, Grace,' I murmur in my head. 'Are you well?'

As my fingers begin to caress her engraved memory, I hear an answering whisper. 'Good afternoon Catherine, dear,' the sweet, soft sound of my imagination replies. 'Have you had a good day?'

And, as I'd dreamed of, before I stopped dreaming, I silently tell her of my day, of the first tentative step towards a friendship with Elizabeth. Just as I would've told the mother who abandoned me, and Agnes, before she forgot me. When I move onto the next plaque, which reads Harold Clyde Templeton the First, I'm almost at peace. I take my time, wiping each letter clean, polishing each small screw, so I can spend as long as possible next to the relic of Grace.

As I finish, I linger, and - spontaneously - bend to place a quick kiss on Grace's plaque. Why did I do that? Goosebumps raise the flesh on my arms, and I have the eerie sense someone is watching me. I peer around, into the gloom of the chapel, but there is no-one. No eyes except the blind wooden ones of the crucified figure above me.

'Who else am I supposed to kiss?' I sneer at that stupid man on his stupid cross. His relentless sorrow bears down on me; I swear I see a tear roll down his cheek. I blink, and it's gone. I hurry into the next pew, only to trip over a pair

of long legs. They're stretched out in front of an outlander, who watches me with impassive eyes. Eyes that shift and swirl from blue to grey as quickly as does the sea, lying still with temptation, there beyond the parish gardens.

Where was he when I glanced around? Did he hear my blasphemy? I feel the mottled speckles heat in what passes as a blush on my tainted skin, and, aggressive in my embarrassment, I ask, 'Who are you?'

He stands, and I have to tilt my chin up and up, for he is extraordinarily tall, with long black hair, loosely tied back with a thong. A silver earring glints in one ear. His leather jacket has no sleeves, and I see a red heart, with three swords piercing it. On the other arm, a banner reading *"Faith & Hope & Charity"* floats above a small crucified Christ nailed in blue to his bicep. And on the fingers of one hand the letters L-O-V-E. On the other hand, P-E-A-C-E. I roll my eyes. A biker, I think, an honest-to-God biker, right down to the tattoos.

With neither Father Murray nor Elizabeth around, only I can help him, if I want to. But unknowns are bad news for me; I become less than who I've discovered I am.

Placing the can of Brasso and my cleaning rags on the nearest pew, I sigh. After all, experts have humiliated me, so why should I care if this man saw me kissing a church pew? Or what he thinks of my bleached appearance.

'Can I help you?' I say. 'Are you lost?'

'Not as lost as some,' he replies.

I'm not in the mood for jokes, so I stare blankly at him, using my idiot scowl. I've learnt a lot with that expression. It comforts people into thinking my brain is as blank as my skin. They'll talk freely, about secrets they'd never talk about in front of me if they knew just how much I understood. It's saved my life, once or twice, and I can keep it in place for hours, even through the most gruelling interrogation.

This time, though, I find it hard to sustain. He just stands there, letting me gaze my fill of him, of those old, old eyes.

Something monstrous, something huge and overwhelming, pulses to life deep inside me. If I give it a chance, it'll flood my soul with darkness and destroy me. To break its spell, I force myself to step backwards.

'Who are you?' I rasp the demand again. 'What do you want?'

'I work here,' he says calmly. 'In the garden. My name is Tikkun Enoch Didymus,' he adds. 'But most people just call me Ted,' and his wry grin forgives me my bark of astonished laughter at his name.

'We each have our cross to bear,' I joke, surprising myself. 'A name is the least of it.'

I can't bear the understanding that leaps into his eyes. Somehow, pity is worse than hatred, because how can anyone know what its like to live my life? I curl my lip at him, but

that only makes his eyes ebb into a deeper grey. I step closer, and widen the curl so my upper teeth show; it's made tough and unrepentant women run from me, screaming, 'Devil! Devil!'.

'Are you trying to scare me?' he asks, casually patting his leather jacket until he finds a pack of cigarettes. He casually lights one, and purses his lips, so a perfect circle of smoke wafts towards the altar.

Even I - who have discovered the deepest wickedness masquerading as compassion - am shocked. I forget my pose.

'You can't smoke here!' I gasp.

Another perfect circle floats away from him. 'Why not?'

'It's...it's...you're in a church! A holy place!'

'Why should you care?' he mocks gently. 'An atheist like you.'

Why indeed? I can't answer him, and he unsettles me, so I do what I do best. I go on the attack. I grab the cigarette from his hand. 'Stop it,' I say, and crush the stub out with my fingertips. It's a trick that makes me look mean. As well as ugly.

'Impressive,' he says, and throws back his head so laughter can roll out of his throat. Neither mocking, nor dangerous, it touches a part of me I never knew existed. When I think of my posing, how ridiculous it was when I practised it in front of the small square of mirror which was all they allowed us, I can't contain a small grin. And, as I sheepishly

meet his eyes, openly inviting me to join in his amusement, I don't recognise the scratchy sound as coming from my throat, for it's been an eternity since I laughed, really laughed.

'Well done, Catherine,' he says, and strokes a slender finger down my cheek, shocking tears into my eyes, making me forget until much, much later that I hadn't told him my name.

I meet him again the next morning in the Garden of Remembrance. I'm clutching an offering of fragrant white roses I bought from an old crone selling flowers just beyond the parish grounds and I go to find the small vault that holds Grace's ashes. He is there before me, wiping the dew off the miniature marble angel watching over her. A short way away, his garden trowel holds a pile of weeds captive as a light morning wind blows the smell of the sea through the Parish grounds.

'You're early, Catherine,' he says, even though his back is towards me, and I thought I'd made no noise.

'So are you.' I stop next to him, but he stays hunched down, his hands draping the damp cloth between his open thighs. I risk a look at him, but his gaze locks on to the marble statuette. The silence grows, until I feel dizzy with it, the thorns of the white roses pricking my clenched fingers. I shiver as the breeze deepens with moisture from the bay.

I want to ask him how he knew my name, but somehow I talk about the weather. 'It's going to rain today,' I say.

He glances up at my words, and sniffs the air. 'Perhaps,' he says, and stands upright, dwarfing me, so I step back, uncomfortable with his nearness.

'We need the rain,' I say, to fill the silence.

'It's coming,' he says, 'but not yet.'

He brushes some dirt off his hands, and slots them into his jeans. They fit him snugly and, in that instant, a thought I'd never dared allow myself before, swims to the surface of my mind. Unlike other men I meet, he's comfortable with me; he acts as if I'm normal. Would it - could it - be that, like Elizabeth and Father Murray, my body is of no consequence to him? Can the impossible become possible...no! As ruthlessly as he has weeded this secluded garden, I weed out that thought before it begins to grow. For it would take a miracle. And miracles are only the delusions of those who have the money to afford them.

'If you say so,' I ask, surly with a disappointment that has no right to exist. Then I feel bad for making him the scapegoat for the shapeless rage ricocheting round my life. I can't bring myself to smile at him, but I soften my voice as I add, 'What makes you think it won't rain?'

He shrugs, and bends over the pile of debris, sweeping it into a black plastic bag with long, elegant fingers that somehow, despite the garish letters adorning them, are too

delicate for such an earthy task. I saw a TV programme once, of a piano concerto. The camera focused on the black-and-white keys, and the musician's hands - as long and elegant as this man's - swept gracefully over the keyboard.

'Call it gardener's intuition,' he says and smiles. What that smile does to me is unbearable.

'Yes.' The word holds all my resentment of Ted's kindness; of my life that is so meaningless.

He says, with a lilt to his voice, 'God is your friend, Catherine.'

I shake my head sullenly, not wanting to think about that man hanging on the cross. Nor do I want to recognise the temptation he offers as this man, who is as real as the other is not, lays a gentle hand on my arm. For a moment I let myself savour Ted's warmth, closing my eyes against his kindness that is pity.

I turn my back on him, angry with him for intruding on the time I wanted with Grace, angry for wanting what I am forever denied.

Sorry, Grace, I whisper in my head to her angel, and fling the white roses on to the grass at the foot of the Remembrance wall.

Stay, I hear the leaves rustle, stay with him. But I refuse to listen. Unrequited love is a dish I've already eaten from. I have no need to taste it again. Elizabeth's friendship is all I can hope for now, to fill the hollows in my heart.

It'll be enough. I need nothing else. And so, without even glancing behind me to where the clink of the trowel tells me he's digging weeds from between the stone path slabs, I leave the garden, carefully shutting the decorative wooden gate behind me.

For what can Ted say that I need to hear? It was his god who made my body this way, and his god who allows my soul to long for the dreams my tainted body prohibits. And it is this same vindictive god who then sends Ted, and Agnes - yes, even the good Sister Agnes - to show me just how hopeless dreams can be.

I stopped believing the nuns' promises when I was barely five. They'd force me to my knees, before another Christ, hanging dolefully from a colossal cross in the small chapel, just off the orphanage dining room.

'Pray to Jesus for forgiveness of your sins,' they chant, pushing me to my knees.

The hard stone floor scraped through the thin cloth of my dress. I flinched, but welcomed the pain, hoping - if I prayed hard enough - God would forgive me. Then He'd colour my hair and skin as black as the other children, as black as it should be were I not born a sinner.

'Prayer will clear the evil from your soul,' the nuns said. Then, to ward off any contamination my appearance - in

their eyes a sure reflection of my soul - could bring them, they stealthily crossed themselves.

'What did I do? Why don't the children want to play with me?' I asked Sister Agnes one day. 'Does God hate me?'

Although, in the end, she isn't courageous enough, Sister Agnes - the youngest of the nuns, her face roundly framed by her wimple - hadn't yet forgotten what compassion was.

'He loves you, child, you're God's special angel,' she whispered. Tucking a white rose beneath my pillow, she bent to kiss my chafed knees. 'Never stop believing that.'

Then, I trusted her. Then, I prayed and prayed for her to be my friend, to ease the loneliness. One friend only, that's all I wanted, to compensate in some small way for all that I suffered in my difference.

I stopped believing Agnes years ago. When I realised god was a fiction, a gross deceit imposed on frightened children who grow into terrified adults, too scared to stop following religious rituals, just in case there is a God.

Fools! The lot of them are just fools.

'Better go to church on Sunday,' they say. 'Rather safe than sorry,' they add, with an instinctive shiver bred of too many hours spent in Sunday school. 'Who wants to burn in hell?'

Secretly believing there is no God, yet still they fill up the churches and the synagogues, the mosques and the temples of the world.

Fools! The lot of them are just fools.

I can tell them a person can survive hell. I've lived it for nearly thirty years, and still I survive. It's not hot. Hell is cold, cold as the ice encasing my emotions as I leave Ted whistling in the garden behind me.

I've never had a lover. No man has ever kissed, or held me, in love. I accepted long ago that no one would ever want me. But when I gaze in the mirror, I can't blame them. Not exactly.

I have to pass through the chapel to get to the office I'll now share with Elizabeth. Against my will, I trudge up to the altar. The suffering Christ hangs unchanged.

'You're not alone,' I say aloud, my voice tinny in the empty church. 'Are you always so miserable?'

A crack of laughter startles me and, swinging around, I find Father Murray watching me, his chubby frame still shaking with the remnants of his laugh.

'I'm on my way to the office,' I explain. 'I'll leave.'

'Stay, child. Let's talk awhile.'

I shake my head. 'You came to work,' I say, pointing to the tray he puts down on the pew nearest to him. 'I don't want to stop you.'

'I came to pray for the dead soldiers. They can wait a few minutes.'

'The dead soldiers?'

'It was on the morning news. Another thirty soldiers died in The War, a suicide bomb.'

I point to the wooden figure suspended above us. 'No wonder he can't smile,' I say. I don't care if I offend the priest with my irreverence. Who cares about offending me when they stare and whisper as I walk by?

Father Murray simply smiles, his heavy, cleanly shaven jowls wobbling against his collar. Too tight, it looks like it's choking him. And it's shiny - shiny, round and white, as white as the rose Sister Agnes used to hide beneath my pillow.

'Pain is pain,' he says, and then he nods up at the Christ image. 'Still He suffers.'

He walks to stand next to me, placing a soft, podgy finger on my forearm. The hesitant touch against my skin is becoming familiar. First Elizabeth. Then Ted. Now this funny little man. This close I can spot the sparse patches of grey beard he must have missed when shaving this morning.

'He suffers,' he says again. Shaking his head sadly, he pats my bleached hand. 'Like you do.'

The crucifix blurs, melting like the waxen tears of a burning candle, and I can hear nothing, feel nothing, except the damp warmth of his fingers and the same rushing whisper that I heard before.

'I'm not suffering,' my pride denies. 'I'm happy.' The black tide ebbs. Still I'm not too sure exactly what it is I'm pushing away.

He gives my hand a final squeeze. 'If you say so.' He fetches his tray, and transfers his priestly treasures on to the altar. Some candles; matches. Incense. Bread and wine, and finally some dried herbs that could be marjoram, or oregano.

Father Murray notices the herbs interest me. He reaches over, crushing a few of the leaves with his flat, fat fingers. A sharp smell, soothing, cleansing, and familiar, assails my nostrils. And I see Sister Agnes, alive in my imagination once more.

I pushed the door to her room open without knocking. She sat in an empty bath, her naked back towards me. Her mousy brown hair, wet with sweat, hung loose over her shoulders as she mauled her back with a bunch of dried herbs, Sister Johanna standing sentinel at the foot of the tub.

'Purge me with hyssop,' I heard her sob, as she scrubbed and scrubbed until the blood showed close under the skin, flowing freely from the deeper scratches. Her arm pumped up and down, over her shoulder, revealing glimpses of a heavy white breast that both shocked and enthralled me. I had never seen a woman's breast before; nor had I guessed there was skin paler even than mine.

'I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.' Her voice, cracked and hoarse, didn't sound like Sister Agnes at all. Frightened by the sight, afraid of being where I shouldn't be, I ran. I ran away, the smell of broken herbs clinging to my nostrils.

Just like the smell wafting from Father Murray's fingers as he works with the herbs.

'What is it?' I don't take my eyes off the crumbling fragments falling in lonely spirals to the floor.

'Hyssop.' He offers a dried twig to me. 'Take some, so we can pray for the soldiers.'

'No,' I grate harshly, 'they don't need my prayers.'

I turn, the smell of herbs strong in my head. In my haste to escape, I stumble, crashing to the floor on my knees. There's a familiar pain as the hard stone floor starts them bleeding, but before the priest can reach out a hand to help, I push myself upright and run. I don't stop running until I slam the office door, keeping him out, keeping him away.

Only then am I saved. From the cloying benevolence of the priest. From his useless altar. And, most especially, I save myself from the false, lying image of a Christ, still silently mocking all the dreams I ever had.

CHAPTER FIVE

ELIZABETH

The Past, fifteen years ago

The vision of a forgiving Christ stays with Elizabeth. From the moment she first draws strength from it, floating high above the old school gates, it becomes her beacon. A candle illuminating her escape.

When her resolve trembles with doubt, she likes to think of His suffering. The image of nails, pounded into the softness of flesh, the soundless scream etched on the face of the Christ-figure, fortify her. She can bear whatever she has to, with Jesus at her side. To remind herself that He's always with her, she buys a bright plastic bracelet from the little shop at the local parish.

She earns a meagre wage from the corner café where she works on Saturday mornings. The first payday after she stares into the face of God, she goes straight to the church.

Father Devin, unlocking the small office safe, smiles at her eager shuffling. 'I'm going as fast as I can,' he says, bemused by the determination in one so young, understanding why she wakes him from his rare afternoon sleep. Sometimes her father empties her purse.

At first, the priest doesn't want her money. 'I pay my way,' Elizabeth insists, 'I'm not a charity case.'

They both know she's lying. Her mother never has any money to feed them, so Elizabeth comes to the parish for help. Finally, the priest takes the coins, damp with her excitement, and hands over the shiny pink band she points out.

'Thanks, Father Devin.' Reverently, she slips the band on. It hangs slightly loose, for her arm - slender still with youth - is too small. Elizabeth doesn't worry. She'll grow into the bracelet, and all it represents.

The Past, ten years ago

She buries her mother in some dull, arid grave. Then, clutching only an introductory letter from the local priest and a small bag of second-hand clothes, she escapes to the city. Her gamble pays off. During her first week in the city, she meets Clyde Templeton.

The grandson of the old woman who gives her a home, he quickly becomes the twin candle lighting her soul with hope. When she tastes the dust of yesterday, her comfort comes from

speaking to Clyve. Or touching the bracelet she still wears around her wrist.

She's wearing it when Clyve's friend somehow makes her ashamed of it. Elizabeth, still new to the city's ways, is uncertain how to react when Simon Wiseman lifts her wrist and peers at the faded letters.

w.w.j.d? they read, what would jesus do?

'What's this?' he asks.

She tugs, wanting her arm back, disliking the careful way his lips hug his words, pulling her into her past even as he draws her closer, too close. 'A b-b-bracelet.'

'It's plastic!' He laughs. Pressing her against him with drunken fervour, he tempts her, sliding his other hand around her waist. 'Give me a kiss and I'll buy you a gold one, real gold.'

Stupidly conscious - too conscious - of her mended underwear, and the almost invisible patch in her best dress, just where his hand clutches her waist, Elizabeth retreats into dignity.

'Let me go. Please.'

'Just one kiss, love.'

'No!' She thinks of Christ cleansing the temple of evil with righteous anger and a whip. It gives her the strength to grind the sharp heel of her shoe into his foot.

'Bitch!' He grunts, dropping his arms. 'What did you do that for?'

Her voice is steady and cool. 'I asked you to let me go.'

'What's the big deal about a kiss?' He grabs another drink off the tray of a passing waiter, hurling it down his throat. 'We're at a party!'

'I'm with someone.' Elizabeth searches for Clyve, missing him. She wants him near her, where she can see and touch him.

'Who? I haven't met you before.' Simon strokes a finger down her cheek. He smells of sweat, and something else she can't identify, evil or lust. She isn't sure there's a difference. Wanting to retch, she jerks her face out of his reach, rubbing her fingers over her talisman.

w.w.j.d? The letters slide invisibly under her fingers. She can't feel them, but their energy, their strength, eases her soul.

'I'm with Clyve Templeton.' The bracelet works its magic. She sounds firm, and in control.

He throws his head back, laughing, his mouth so wide the row of gold fillings in his molars glitter avariciously.

'You're Clyve's milkmaid - from up-country! I heard him say May's latest charity case is a little beauty.' His dull mud eyes, so unlike the soft brown of Clyve's, touch her in places she's never let any man touch her.

Not even Clyve. She already loves him, so dissimilar in every way to her Father. She almost let him kiss her last night, but his grandmother interrupted them, her face austere.

Mrs Templeton - 'Everyone calls me Granny May,' she orders - frightens Elizabeth. On her arrival in the city, Father Devin's friend Father Murray, dropped Elizabeth off at the imposing mansion sprawling over the bottom of the mountain as it looks towards the bay. The old woman greeted Elizabeth kindly, but her eyes stayed reserved. She watched Elizabeth all the time, with a gaze familiar in its intensity. It told her she isn't good enough. Drunken Sam's daughter will always be a charity case.

The same glint is in Simon's eyes.

Charity case. Charity case. Charity case.

Only Clyve loves beyond the social ineptness and the mended clothes. She touches her bracelet again, and he looms up behind Simon, her avenging angel. Her love.

'Unspoilt beauty is what I said, Sim.'

He hands Elizabeth her orange juice, and gives Simon a direct glower from under his brows, his mouth sterner than she's ever seen it. He slings a possessive arm around her shoulder - not tall, yet so much taller than she, her head tucks neatly under his arm. Elizabeth relaxes, safe.

'I'd like her to stay that way, Sim.'

'You're not my keeper, Templeton,' Wiseman sneers, and disappears into the darkness.

To Elizabeth, it's another miracle. After they leave Simon and the party behind, she takes Clyve into her room in Mrs Templeton's grand mansion.

The next day he buys her a new dress. Pale pink silk, with a small round collar and a thin belt pinching in her waist, it's expensively demure. Before they leave the shop, she removes the little plastic bracelet with the initials w.w.j.d?. Unobtrusively slipping it into her new purse, she tells herself she doesn't need it any more, for now she has Clyve.

The Present

Standing before the mirror, her long one in the bathroom, rusting along the edges where the moisture from the shower seeps under the glass, Elizabeth inspects her appearance. Her life is so different now, but she still remembers inspecting herself for patches rather than perfection.

She wipes a cloth across the mirror and wishes it were as easy to wipe away the images of a different Elizabeth. One young and uncertain when she arrived in the city; an innocent, despite the harsh reality of her childhood. It's gone, that innocence, buried under the struggle to get to this point: soon she will be Mrs Clyve Templeton.

Nine years, she thinks, nine long years of getting them to accept me. Exhausting years, for she's always tired these days. In bed long before Clyve came home from his business dinner last night, she's still tired. Tired and restless, as she is most of the time.

She blames the albino woman. The days, the weeks, of showing Cathy kindness after kindness. Elizabeth has never forgotten the promise she made herself, that day beneath the iridescent Christ, hanging high above the school gates. She'd just never realised how difficult it would be to keep that promise.

The door to the bathroom slides open, the squeaky castor Clyve still hasn't oiled breaking into her thoughts.

'Morning, Bethy.' He stumbles into the bathroom, his underpants sagging beneath his belly - the business lunches he so enjoys settle too easily around his middle - and leans one hand on the marbled wall, groaning, 'Christ!' His other hand reaches automatically into his crumpled shorts, drawing out his semi-flaccid penis, aiming it carelessly at the toilet bowl.

'Good morning,' she replies and studies his reflection in the mirror. Where, she wonders, has her beautiful saviour gone? Buried in the earthiness of nearly a decade of intimacy, she decides, as Clyve yawns and shakes himself dry, before wandering across to kiss her casually on the cheek, as he does every morning.

'What time did you get in?' she asks.

'Late.' A sour belch escapes him. 'Sorry,' he says, a grin stretching his eyes into mischievousness.

She doesn't dignify it with an answer. Instead, she turns her face away and begins applying her mascara. 'How much did

you have to drink last night?' She sounds like her mother, nagging and nervous, so she drags a smile from somewhere, adding, 'Did you have enough dinner?'

'Gerard had a new speciality on the menu.' He rubs his stomach. 'Duck in orange and chilli sauce. Delicious! Wiseman had it too.'

The mascara wand stops weaving its magic. Carefully, with hardly a tremor, she replaces the lid. She slips it into her make-up drawer, and asks as casually as she can, 'Wiseman? Simon Wiseman was there?'

'Yeah.' Clyve takes out his toothbrush, spreading his green-and-white striped toothpaste haphazardly along the bristles. The mint-flavoured paste is his favourite, and Elizabeth always makes sure he has a new tube available. 'He's CEO of Brumer Pharmaceuticals.'

'Oh.'

'Marr...d,' he mumbles indistinctly, through his vigorous brushing. 'Bru...r's ...ghter.'

After a moment of confusion, she guesses, 'Married to Brumer's daughter?' He nods. 'Oh.' What does he expect her to say? 'Is she pleasant?'

Bending forward over the basin, he spits out the froth and rinses his mouth before washing his face, careless of the water splashing everywhere. 'Who cares what she's like?' Carefully embroidered with an elaborate "C", the fluffy hand towel he dries his face with muffles his laugh. 'She's

Brumer's only child, and heir to his fortune! Wiseman's always been a lucky devil.'

The devil part she can agree with. And wonders if Clyve would rather have someone like Wiseman's wife. Elizabeth came to him without decent clothes on her back. All she had was her faith. Clyve still tells her he loves her, but...she shakes off the hollowness inside her and, for the first time in years, thinks of her faded pink bracelet, tucked away somewhere she can't remember.

She sighs, rubbing the emptiness on her arm, wishing she could forget today is Friday. Three months to her wedding day. And the one day of the week she dreads seeing Father Murray.

'Good morning, Elizabeth,' he'll greet her, adding as he always does, 'Shall I take your confession today?'

'Yes,' she'll say, as she always does. Elizabeth hasn't given a proper confession for years and she worries what Father Murray thinks.

She lives with Clyve, in the same house where Father Murray himself first took her to meet Granny May. Living with her sin, Elizabeth sometimes thinks in the middle of the night when Clyve rolls off her body. Huffing out his thanks, he falls into the deep sleep of a clear conscience, while she lies sleepless. What does God think about what she has done with her life?

Father Murray never asks. Not even when he's safely behind the burgundy velvet curtain separating them in the confessional. And she never tells, although it's heavier to bear since Clyve finally asked her to marry him. As if now that their love will have a proper blessing by the Church - if she can only get the wedding invitations out on time! - she needs a clean heart before she binds herself to Clyve for eternity.

Perhaps, when she gets to the Parish this morning, before the others arrive she'll say, 'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.'

She'll ask Father Murray to bless her, and then she'll tell him.

Perhaps.

Or perhaps she'll simply confess the usual sins. The occasional 'My God!' that escapes her. Or the small bursts of anger that sometimes catch her unawares. Far better, she decides, edging the towel Clyve used into perfect corners, to stay in control. For, in the catharsis of a real confession, what if she forgets herself, and tells him other secrets too?

Clyve's soft monotone settles her dormant sorrow. 'You'll get the chance to meet Wiseman's wife,' he says. 'We're having dinner there next week.'

'Dinner where?'

'At Wiseman's house.'

Her answer is instinctive, birthed from the demon prowling her memories, scared and dangerous and hungry for more. 'No,' is all she says.

It's so unlike her usual compliance, her urgent need to ensure that Clyve can find no fault in her, in case he remembers she came to him a nobody, he stares at her blankly.

'I don't like Wiseman,' she explains in a half-truth, 'so I won't go.'

'I'd appreciate it if you would come with me,' he says carefully. 'There'll be other people there, people you'll like.'

In the end, Elizabeth can't refuse. What else has she to give him, if not to do what he asks of her? And, with a frustrated rumble, the demon within her, defeated by her own fear, slinks back into the darkness.

'Is it important business?'

'Crucial,' he says, not holding a grudge now she's conceded. 'If Wiseman approves the purchase of the Templeton pharmacies, I'll never have to work again.'

'How will we live?' Memories of collecting food parcels from Father Devin flood her. She holds steady, reaching for the edges of her self-control, forcing herself not to panic. 'What will we do?'

'What will change?' he asks, smiling. 'You can carry on doing your good deeds at St Jerome's and I'll fish.'

Fishing suits Clyve's nature. Solid as the roots of the oak tree growing next to the gates guarding the entrance to the Templeton mansion, he's as real as she is not. A whisper of warning trickles into her mind. If she's not real, it taunts, who then is the Elizabeth she has become?

For, in this city life she has carved out, seeking an Elizabeth who belongs, Elizabeth Johnson has lost her way. Despite the gold bracelets chiming her success, the barrenness circling her wrist cries out in silent reproof. Not even a white strip of flesh remains as evidence of the faith she once had.

She leaves Clyve dressing and drives to the relative safety of St Jerome's small parish office. She parks the car and slowly, dully, walks to the office, still hearing that silent cry when she meets Cathy. Waiting outside the parish office, the albino stands shivering in the chill autumn wind blowing off the bay.

Elizabeth usually makes the effort to greet her warmly. Today, as she unlocks the heavy wooden door, she can do no more than offer a muted 'Hello'. As she busies herself with the daily routine of waking the parish office - checking the answering machine, opening the mail - she senses Cathy staring at her.

'Are you upset?' the girl asks, in her blunt, forthright manner.

Elizabeth wants to smile and reassure her. Yet, somehow, when she sees the determined impassiveness on Cathy's face, her wailing can be silent no more. The sob tears at her chest, embarrassing her as it erupts from her throat. Fighting for control, she covers her mouth, turning her back.

The tension thrums through the air. She can feel the albino's hesitation, and she's grateful for the time it gives her. When Cathy hesitantly puts out a hand, ashen against the navy jersey she's wearing, Elizabeth is able to pat it reassuringly.

'Can I - can I help you?' Cathy asks.

She gives a single, firm shake of her head. Safely in control again, she counts out spoons of freshly ground coffee into the percolator. Father Murray likes his first cup strong and hot.

The descending silence sinks into calmness, until Elizabeth is only aware of metal scratching on plastic as Cathy digs for a paper clip in her stationery holder.

As she screws the lid back on the coffee canister, Elizabeth pauses, watching Cathy meticulously clip together the monthly accounts of the Parish. A smile comes unbidden; she imagines some invisible observer will see the same fierce concentration on her face as she bends over a task herself. A

pulse of curiosity, a thread of commonality, both forge an invisible and, at first unwanted, connection with Cathy.

A thought, once formed, impossible to dismiss, comes into Elizabeth's head: neither of them fully belongs in this old city, where appearances and bloodlines are all that matter.

Clyve has introduced her to many friends. Beautiful people, confident people, rich and untroubled by hunger or fear. Sometimes she hears the echo of mocking voices coming, not from behind the school gates of her childhood, but from all around her. Those voices shroud Elizabeth Johnson in silence, leaving only someone else in her place. The albino is silent too, she thinks. Whenever Ted is around.

Elizabeth's confession spills out before she can stop it. 'I'm angry with Clyve,' she says.

Cathy freezes in mid-shuffle, before continuing the slow ordering of the paper pile in front of her. 'Oh,' she says, looking at Elizabeth.

Like a beggar with a pot of gold, Elizabeth thinks. Too scared to hope, but hoping just the same.

'He wants me to go a dinner, with a business colleague,' she adds, and sees in Cathy's eyes the birth of some indecipherable yearning. It touches some part of her she's kept inviolate since the days of her childhood. For the first time in...oh, a decade, the real Elizabeth doesn't want to hide any more. She wants to be free.

The smell of liberty touches Cathy too, for her voice is unlike its usual abrasive bark as she asks, 'How bad can one dinner party be? It's only a few hours.'

'I've had some...' - how much can she tell her? - 'some unpleasant experiences with this man.'

'Personal experiences?'

'Very personal.'

'Tell your fiancé. He'll understand.'

'He was there,' Elizabeth says, adding to herself, in the beginning. 'He says I misunderstood. That I'm oversensitive.'

Cathy curls her lip. 'Only someone who hasn't been hurt can believe that.'

'True.' Elizabeth puffs a soft laugh, pleased the other woman understands. 'Clyve's had love his whole life. His parents died in The War when he was young, but Granny May's always loved him.'

'And you?'

Elizabeth moves across to the cupboard to get her files out. Father Murray tells her it's safe to leave the cupboard open; still she always locks everything away. 'She does love me,' she agrees, before adding cautiously, 'Maybe.'

Cathy tilts her head to one side, a curious, wistful cat. 'I meant, have you always had someone to love you?'

'Clyve,' Elizabeth says, 'Only Clyve.'

'He's lucky to have someone like you.'

The cupboard door slips loose from Elizabeth's fingers, slowly swinging wide open, too wide for comfort, as she stares perplexedly at Cathy. Admiration shines out of Cathy's eyes and, vaguely uneasy with it, Elizabeth says the first words that pop into her head.

'My Father was an alcoholic.' Shocked to hear herself say those hated words, words she has never spoken aloud, Elizabeth quickly reaches inside the darkness of the cupboard. She takes out a single file, any one, and slams the door shut again.

She can't take back what's already said. So, before Cathy has a chance to answer, she adds, 'No-one else knows.'

Father Murray said the albino woman is intelligent, and Cathy proves him right. 'I'll not tell anyone,' she says.

Elizabeth gives her a thankful smile, and walks to her desk. The clack of her heels is loud in a silence so friendly she struggles with the urge to tell Cathy more, but the habit of solitude holds fast.

'Clyve's a good man,' she says, 'I'm the lucky one.' She thinks of all that's happened since she came to the city, how changed her life is because of Clyve's love. 'I should go with him,' she says aloud. 'It's only one evening.'

A distant rumble warns her that Father Murray and Ted have arrived, and she takes a final comfort in Cathy's words. 'After all,' she adds, a dim guilt twisting her lips into a rueful smile, 'it can't last forever.'

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

MAY

The Past, fifty years ago

For days after the stranger's first visit, a dim guilt eats into my peace.

'What's wrong with you?' Harry asks. He's not used to me quiet. Normally I have no trouble discussing how to expand the pharmacy, or directing the multitude of staff who keep my mansion running smoothly.

'What could be wrong?' I flip another page. A silly book; the newspaper reviews tell me it's the most recent literary success. Reading is a chore, one I force myself to do in the same way I practise my elocution and every gesture I make. My attention wanders, for I can't bring myself to care about an old man and a boy, faith and a fish. Or even sacrifices and the sea.

There was never much time for reading when I was young. We moved too often, living out of suitcases barely big enough

to hold our clothes, let alone books having little to do with survival in a world where only the strong endure. I never once joined a library. I had my natural intelligence, and I managed just fine. Little Mayflower did well for herself.

'There is something wrong,' Harry insists when I say no more.

I rouse enough energy to give him my cool look, the one that warns others not to step past the boundaries I set.

'No,' I say. 'I'm fine.'

He wants to argue, but I hold his gaze until he gets up to open a window.

'I saw Mother today,' he says. 'She's keeping well.'

'Umm.' I turn another page.

'Her visitor is good for her, I think.'

I tense and, even though I know of whom he speaks, I ask, 'Her visitor?'

'Enoch. That fellow we met last week.'

'Oh. Him.' A rapid flick, pretending an interest I don't have in the pages. I read, and shiver.

Harry doesn't see. 'I liked him. Yes,' he nods, 'I liked him.'

'He doesn't belong.' It's the closest I can come to saying how much Enoch - and my reaction to him - disturbs me.

'Belong where?'

'Here.' A casual wave of my hand marks the plush décor. The mansion bears my imprint, but Grace's influence still

lingers, for it is she who brings the stranger here. 'Do you think this house will make Enoch comfortable?'

'Yes,' Harry says, and juts his short, round jaw out. 'I do.'

Why does he always choose such inconvenient issues to be stubborn about? He married me for my strength; for the steel May forged out of the ashes of Mayflower's life. So why does he still try to fight me?

'He's common,' I say with finality. 'Intrusive. He doesn't respect the order of life: some people have their place.'

It's safer for me to keep Enoch on the other side of my boundary. The one I crossed long before Harry knew me. The one keeping May, and all I've achieved since I locked Mayflower away, impregnable.

'You're a snob, May.' There's no real venom in Harry's statement, for that's just the way the world is. People are different.

'Of course.'

'This time you're wrong.' He huffs a laugh even as he contradicts me. 'Enoch isn't a common man. In fact, I'll say he's an uncommon man.'

To my vexation, Mayflower agrees with him, because I feel her pale arms, tender white with no more blue-black smudges to mar their fragility, reach out towards the sea song of the stranger.

'You can say what you like,' I snarl politely, the liability of my age-old fear stinging Harry. 'He doesn't belong here.' I never lose my temper; no, never; not since Mayflower first found she could feel an anger so deep it went beyond rage and into evil.

An almost imperceptible quaver in my voice reveals that I'm keeping a secret and it gives Harry power. I can see him mentally flexing himself around the taste of it, the feel of it. The stranger makes me vulnerable and, like an animal scenting food, Harry sniffs around it.

He moves in front of me, standing over me as I sit in the plush velvet-red armchair, my book open in front of me. I'm no longer bothering at even the pretence of reading. I refuse to give him the pleasure of rising. If I rise, he'll sense my fear. And May never shows fear. Not May.

'You haven't visited Mother this week,' he says.

He thinks he's clever. You would've thought that after all our years of marriage he'd stop trying to outwit me. I sense the trap and defiantly face my fear.

'That's right,' I agree. 'Why don't you telephone her and ask her if she'll come for tea tomorrow.' I gesture towards the bulky black handset; ugly like all modern instruments are ugly, but convenient. Then I add my coup de grace. 'And, if you think he'll fit in, you should ask her boarder to come as well.'

Confusion, or perhaps disappointment, flits across Harry's pale eyes. 'Enoch?' His voice is as tentative as a butterfly's first flight.

I raise my brows, and say 'Who else?'. A sibilant flap, so soft and slow it gives Harry no clue how much effort it costs me to stay relaxed, and another page is in front of me, the lines a black blur. I console myself that what I feel is anger. I can manage anger, but I fear this is worse. It's Mayflower, stirring deep within the ocean of my heart.

And nothing I do calms her trembling soul.

The rose garden is still in full bloom, but this time I go myself. There, I stand, scanning the bay. White caps dance innocently on a jade surface, and a yearning to have more than just a good view of the sea fills me.

Since I gave birth to my son, Harry the Third, I'm unsettled and filled with fancies. The sweeping view across the bay is what makes this old mansion such a valuable piece of property. Why would I want to lose it by moving closer to the ocean, when I never swim anyway? A brisk sea wind, gentle today, brushes my face, but doesn't answer my questions.

'Ma'am May?' Elijah, dressed in his chauffeur's hat and jacket, appears at my elbow and I almost destroy a rose in my surprise. He usually shuffles along, hacking and coughing into a large white handkerchief, so one can hear him long before he

arrives. Today, the view of the sea holds me captive, unaware of his approach.

'Yes, Elijah?' My irritation at the intrusion shows. He blinks, that long slow blink of his, so like an innocent child, yet age and sorrow line his face.

'Beulah said I must bring you this.' He hands me a basket for the flowers. I fill its empty womb with the few roses I've picked. Only a handful, I note distractedly, and nod my thanks even as my gaze swings back to the sea.

I think he's gone, until he coughs, an old man's cough that speaks of poverty. My Daddy has the same cough, even though the senility has made him forget what caused it.

'The sea, she is good,' Elijah says. 'Ma'am May must listen when she speaks.'

'The sea can't speak. It's not alive.'

A sudden gust of wind, no longer gentle, but sharp, tugging the ends of my neatly tied braid, brings a stronger smell of salt, perhaps even a hint of rain yet to come. It makes me nervous. Turning away, I start to cut the roses more quickly. I want to fill the house with them. For effect, I tell Harry over breakfast, but Mayflower knows otherwise.

Elijah, unasked, follows me, holding the basket out every time I cut another flower.

'It lives in all of us,' he says suddenly. 'But sometimes it sleeps, and you think it's dead.'

Oh God! I think. As if Grace's rambles aren't enough, now Elijah is also becoming as incomprehensible as his old employer. 'What are you talking about?'

'The sea.'

'The sea can't live inside a person,' I say, with a fair attempt at patience.

'It lives,' he insists, and so I ignore him. He should have retired long ago, so we could hire a new young driver, but Harry refuses. If Elijah gets as bad as Grace, I decide, he'll have to go. One of them is enough for me to cope with.

The sea wind curls around my legs, whipping my skirt around my knees, invisible claws finally freeing wisps of my hair. I walk faster. Elijah follows steadily, carrying the basket and its bounty with both hands, occasionally putting it down so he can cough into his hankie.

His cough is getting worse, so I suppose I'll have to take him to the doctor. It's what Grace would do, and I won't ever do less than the previous Mrs Templetons did. In truth, I'd like people to call me Mrs T with the same softness they use when speaking to Grace.

That's why I put so much effort into the local charities. I've been chairing the Feed the War Orphans Fund for the past five years, and will probably be there for a few years still. My next goal is to take the chair of the Animal Rescue Response. In this town, masquerading as a Mother city - priding itself on its bloodlines and the dominating sweep of

its bay - those are the two prestigious charities, so I've focused on them. For the moment, I'm content to wait in the shadows of the other, lesser committees where I volunteer a few hours each week.

I place another rose in the basket. Its fragility reminds me of Grace. Grace, who never gave a minute of her time to any of the Charities I dedicate my life to.

'I'm too busy for all that politicking,' she says when I asked her. We'd just moved into the mansion, and Grace had come to inspect the changes I'd made. 'There's always someone who needs my help.'

'We help people,' I said, and launched into a description of all the fund-raising functions Harry and I attend.

'Yes, dear,' she agreed mildly. 'But I still prefer to meet people. Ordinary people. I so enjoy going to visit, and finding out what's happening in their lives.'

Perhaps Grace found the lives of ordinary people interesting because she's always lived a life of privilege. Having lived an ordinary life myself, I had no wish to return there.

I'd replaced the old wooden balustrade with an ornate wrought-iron one. Grace stroked a finger along it, her eyes dim with the memory of what was. Then she added, 'I believe

Johnny Mason's wife had twins yesterday. I think I'll call on them.'

'Johnny Mason?' asked Harry. 'The name's familiar, but I can't place him.'

'He's overseer at the farm, dear,' Grace chided. 'He started just before your Father crossed over.' Her eyes blinked rapidly, holding back her tears, as she spoke of Harry snr.

Harry shrugged, and said no more, his farm manager's diminutive existence already forgotten. Grace didn't forget her little people as quickly as Harry did. 'You should visit, Harry. You and May.'

'I can't, Grace,' I said quickly. 'We're in the middle of organising the Annual Hunt Ball for the War Orphans Fund. It's going to be outstanding this year.'

'I'm sure it will be, dear,' Grace smiled, 'but will the animals think so?'

She was rambling again, so I ignored her, and said to Harry, 'You must diarise the sixteenth, darling. We'll be at the top table again.'

'The sixteenth? But that's weeks away!' Grace brightened. 'You can take me to visit Johnny's twins.'

'All the way out to that hospital? No,' I said firmly, 'I don't have the time. Elijah can drive you. Harry will use his new car to go to the pharmacy.'

Grace shrunk a bit, in the way old people do when they're tired but not admitting it. She closed her eyes and, leaning back in the chair, said, 'You will send him a present won't you?'

'Of course I will.'

I did, but later - when we saw the Masons at church - they fell all over Grace, and barely thanked me, despite the costly silver picture frames I sent, one for each twin.

Annoyed, I simply nodded at their gratitude and walked ahead, leaving Grace happily cooing over the red-faced infants.

Later, she joined me, flushed with excitement.

'May,' Grace said, with that breathless hiccup she has when especially pleased. 'You'll never believe what's happened!'

I hazarded a guess. 'The baby smiled at you.'

'Oh yes, and so sweetly too!' Jubilantly, Grace agreed. I prepared myself for a long description of a toothless, gummy smile. And wondered, behind my gritted teeth, if I was the only Mrs Templeton in the long and distinguished bloodlines of previous Templeton wives who suffered from such unbearable boredom.

Grace surprised me. 'That's not my news,' she said.

'Johnny and his wife - they asked me my names.'

Still I didn't guess what was coming. I should have, I tell myself later, as I discarded the shredded tissue I'd been holding, but I didn't.

'You're Mrs Templeton to those people,' I said sharply. Grace has firm views on equality. 'Our hearts are one and the same, dear,' she'll often say. 'Despite the unfortunate differences the world imposes.'

Soon she'll expect my son to play with this worker's children. 'You mustn't let them become too familiar, Grace. Those sort always take advantage.'

'Oh, no dear! They've done me a great honour.' Her eyes, despite her age, were as blue as Harry's once were. Does she keep her youthfulness, I wondered, by some maternal osmosis? Leeching her son's eyes to keep hers glowing, while his grow dimmer the longer we're married. 'They want to name those adorable little babies after me! Grace and Odette.'

It ambushed me, surging up from my depths and almost consuming me. But I caught it in time. Before the blackness spewed out my mouth and devoured the silly Grace, standing there in front of me, smiling as though she'd received the greatest gift.

She has, Mayflower whispered, and you're jealous because they didn't name one of the babies after you. They named them after her. After Grace. Saint Grace.

Sometimes I hate Mayflower. I wish I could reach into my breast and hack her out of my soul. For she won't remain silent.

I can't exorcise her, and so I did what I do best. I drowned her in the murky depths of my heart.

'Do you think that's wise?' I asked Grace with a pleasant smile. 'Allowing such informality?'

She shrunk into herself, a sign - I told the worried Harry - of her advancing age. It's one reason I finally managed to convince him that it was time we moved into the mansion, and moved Grace into a small place of her own. Two-bedroomed, even though it cost us extra cash to buy, so she could still have her waifs and strays to stay, if she wanted.

I pushed the blackness back, and squeezed more affability into my voice. I tried again. 'It's a sweet gesture, Grace, but it'll only encourage them to rely on you. Soon they'll be wanting you to pay for your namesakes' education. Or pay for their weddings.'

'Oh, May,' she laughed. 'You can be so humorous sometimes! Why would they expect that?'

Humorous? A tremor rippled beneath my feet. Wanting to find my balance again, I answered quickly, too quickly I later thought, for I revealed too much in my haste to deny an image that made me distinctly awkward.

'Because those people always do. They're not prepared to fight for what they want. It's easier for them to just take and take and take.'

The echo of my words jeered at me in the silence before Grace answered.

'Oh, May, dear,' she sighed, and touched a hand to my cheek with exquisite gentleness.

And with that single gesture, the old woman grew in stature. No longer Harry's sometimes inconvenient mother, she became Mrs T. The same Mrs T whom everyone flocked around every Sunday at church.

Even as we spoke, they were waiting for their turn with her, whispering while they waited, about the new War, about what Mrs T would say about the latest casualties.

Like beggars wanting to touch the garment of a Master for their salvation, they hovered around us, watching as she cupped her fingers around the curve of my cheek. She did it so naturally, so fluidly, I realised that one cannot learn such grace. No, not even if I practised and practised until I was exhausted. It was then I almost let Mayflower weep openly.

'It'll be all right, dear,' she murmured, and the papery dryness of her wrinkled thumb wiped smoothly across my cheek, sucking up the threatening moisture so at least I kept my dignity. 'I won't let them hurt you again.'

Her words, as they so often did, make me nervous. 'It's you I'm worried about, Grace.' I stepped back, dislodging her

touch, and reached into my handbag for my Psalter. 'You're too soft, and people take advantage of you.'

Her hand, momentarily suspended in midair, trembled with emptiness and fell to her side. 'Gentleness isn't weakness, May, dear. It simply needs a different strength.'

She smiled at me with her eyes shining love, and walked past me. My throat too tight to speak I wondered, with her privileged life, what Grace knew of weakness? Or of strength. I watched her people crowding round her, touching her, wanting to ask her this or tell her that, and I waited until she disappeared into the darkness. Only then did I trail behind in her wake. I walked under the oppressive stone arch and crossed over the threshold leading into the Chapel of St Jerome, home to Saint Grace but never home to Mrs May Templeton.

I reach the rose-covered arch that leads us back into the driveway. Elijah trails behind, the basket - cumbersome now, its belly swollen with roses - hampering his movements. I almost regret picking so many. I'd planned to use them for this year's Annual Hunt Ball, but Enoch's coming for tea with Grace today overturns that plan. I want the mansion to overflow with roses; to invade his senses with their fragrant vision. Then he'll recognise my surrender last week as the empty victory it was: for generosity is easy when one has plenty.

'Take the basket to the scullery.' I strip off my gardening gloves, and place them on top of the flowers, careful not to harm any blooms. 'Tell Beulah to leave them alone. I'll be through soon to arrange them.'

Elijah has no breath to reply, so he blinks his eyes in what I take to be agreement. To be certain, I clarify. 'Beulah mustn't touch the roses. No one must. Not even to take the thorns off.'

That's the part I enjoy the most: tearing the thorns off the long-stemmed roses. At first, I'd maul myself, as well as the flowers, leaving pinpricks of blood on the white petals as I struggled to master the technique of removing the thorns. Now I can strip a rose of all its thorns in seconds. The rose remains whole, and all without spilling a drop of my blood.

Elijah blinks again and, helped by the encroaching wind following us up the driveway, staggers off to the back entrance. Once he's out of sight, I sway towards the sea again, for one last glimpse of the bay. The whitecaps, more angry than innocent now, tumble faster as the wind rises steadily. Enoch is coming; it whispers in my ear, are you ready? And Mayflower - damn Mayflower, who just won't die - answers.

'Yes,' she murmurs, sensing freedom. 'I am ready.'

As I finish the last arrangement I hear Harry's car exploding up the driveway. I do my usual visual check. The table first, my silver sugar shaker in the right place. My mahogany cupboard, with all my most precious possessions, securely locked.

Finally, a glance in the long mirror I placed in this room for just this reason. Perfect. I've neatly recaptured my braid and - daringly - I've changed into an elegant navy slacks-suit. I look exactly what I am. A young matron, hostess par excellence, graciously awaiting the arrival of her guests.

The murmur of voices, overlaid with the tap tapping of Grace's cane on the floor. She must be feeling frail today. I can only hope that she doesn't prattle embarrassingly on about angels and Jesus as she did last week. Then I console myself that it's only us for tea, and Enoch, who shouldn't matter, but somehow does.

As prepared as I'll ever be, I walk with careful elegance to the door. They're busy exchanging greetings with Beulah, giving her their hats and coats to store until they're needed again. I have a few precious seconds to observe them, an unseen watcher.

Harry, fussing over his mother. Holding her cane as he slips off her coat. 'Be careful of your cane on the marble floor, Mother,' he says. He checks the bottom before handing

it back. 'The rubber tip is secure; you should be safe if you don't walk too fast.'

She lets him fuss and then, taking her cane, walks to the walnut table standing at the far wall. An eighteenth century piece, it's beautiful and makes an impressive welcome with the great vase of roses I've placed on it. Grace, as slight as she is, doesn't have far to bend to bury her face in the blossoms, deeply breathing their subtle fragrance.

'Ah,' she sighs. 'May has a magic touch with these roses.'

I flush with unwanted satisfaction at the small compliment. I thought I'd inured myself against such trifles as other people's opinion of me, though my jealousy at the Mason's request to name their babies after Grace, and not me, told me otherwise.

Now, sliding like warm mother's milk into my belly, the pleasure I take in hearing my fledgling gardening skills praised reminds me what I still seek. It's unlike me. Unlike May. It makes me nervous, for there was a time when Mayflower only existed when her Daddy praised her.

And then, there's the Enoch effect. It was always Enoch and me. Me, wondering what he'll think. Hoping the mansion's abundant décor will impress him. Did he hear what Grace said?

I secretly slide a look at the front door. There's Harry coaching Beulah on how to fold the coat over her arm to reduce creasing. Then - him. Enmeshing me in a gaze from his sea

eyes, as silent as the ocean depths which harbour little Mayflower.

I tremble with Mayflower, the flush of Grace's praise heating into a burning blaze of embarrassment and fear - yes, fear - as I strive to liberate myself from his unspoken promise.

How can such an ordinary man's eyes defeat a will as strong as May's?

The answer lies with that treacherous bitch Mayflower. The whore. The harlot. Enticing men, as young and fragile as she is, she's evil, always enticing men beyond their endurance. Or so my Daddy said.

The unbearable thought of giving that age-old power back to Mayflower gives May strength. I firm my spine and tell myself I'm no longer a child.

I say, 'You came.' With a practised, regal tilt of my head, I add, 'Welcome back to the Templeton home, Enoch.'

Then, surreptitiously, carefully, so as not to reveal any sign of the effort it costs, I wrench myself free from the sweet temptation in his face. I gasp at the sudden sense of loss as the ocean monster called Mayflower stirs again. And, clawing deeply into what's left of my heart, she howls out her silent rage as I turn and walk away from the stranger who is no stranger to her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CATHY

The Present

From the day I smell Father Murray's herbs, I'm drawn to the altar again and again. Although I resist its lure, the wooden crucifix fascinates me. As does each drop of blood, so painstakingly carved into the hard olive wood, and every rib in the hollow chest telling of a soul, tempted and then saved. Eventually, I wrench myself free from the sweet temptation in His face.

Ignoring the pleading sorrow of the crucifix, burning into my back as I hurry through to the parish office, I hear the clink of the coffee percolator, and smile. That's Elizabeth, I think, preparing Father Murray's coffee first, then she'll fill my mug and - only then - will she fill her own mug with the dark, bitter brew Father Murray likes to sweeten with heaped spoons of sugar.

Since the day Elizabeth told me about her father, a closeness has begun to blossom between us. It reminds me of the feelings I had for Sister Agnes, before I grew to hate

her. But Elizabeth is different from the quiet nun; kindness such as hers is rare.

With unspoken agreement, we both arrive half-an-hour earlier than we need to. Thirty minutes of the day that are like the purest nectar to me. I savour them; suck every drop of enjoyment out of them as one sucks the rich, juicy marrow from a bone. Like the marrow, they're gone too soon. I'm left longing for more but, unused to such a feast of friendship, I hold back, always waiting for Elizabeth to make the first move.

'Good morning,' I say as I open the door.

Elizabeth is pouring the day's quota of milk into a jug. St Jerome's lies in a wealthy neighbourhood, and receives generous stipends from its parishioners - most notably Elizabeth's fiancé. Still, there's never any money to waste. Father Murray uses most of it for his War Relief Fund.

The Fund doesn't leave much for luxuries in the parish, so every morning Elizabeth carefully measures out our daily milk. Today, she discards an empty carton as she greets me.

'Hello,' she replies. 'How was your weekend?'

If anyone else, with their polite curiosity barely hiding their fear of my otherness, had asked me that question, I'd delight in making up a lurid tale. One fitting their vision of what albino freaks do in their spare time.

It's Elizabeth who asks me, so I tell the truth.

'Boring.'

She blinks, and then gives a half-disbelieving laugh.

'Just...boring?'

'Just that.'

'Didn't you do anything?'

'I read, watched TV. Not much else.'

'And the sea? Didn't you find time to go to the sea?'

How much truth is necessary between friends? I've never had a real friend before and telling her I never learned how to swim feels like too much truth to me. So I say, 'Not this weekend. Maybe another time.'

'Oh, you must try, Cathy! It's the most beautiful sight in the world. Sometimes, when Clyve is still asleep, I get up early to sit on the veranda and watch the sun come up over the sea. It's like God saying good morning to me, and me alone, giving me the gift of all that beauty.' She laughs, a touch embarrassed. 'I'm being fanciful. There's probably a thousand people watching the same sight, but it's easy to feel it's just for me.'

I love listening to her talk. She has an innocence, a purity that is separate to the bitterness I carry within. Perhaps, I allow myself to dream, one day she'll invite me to share her gift. We'll sit on the veranda of the Templeton mansion together, in a companionable silence, watching the dark night turn into day.

'Do you,' hoarse with longing, I clear my throat, 'swim often?'

'When I first arrived here, I swam as often as I could.'

She wrinkles her nose in concentration as she counts the spoons of coffee she puts in the machine. Then she adds, 'I hardly get a chance now. Especially with finalising all the arrangements for the wedding.'

I'm hearing more and more about her wedding plans. It's going to be large - the Templetons are old money - and Elizabeth is anxious for her day to be perfect. As crazy as it seems, I sometimes suspect that Elizabeth is as uncertain of her place in this world as I am of mine.

'How are they going?'

She wiggles a hand, palm down. 'So-so. Clyde has no interest in the details, and I don't like to ask Granny May.'

'Why not?' I hear the aggression in my voice and quickly, lest Elizabeth thinks it's aimed at her, I add, 'Clyde's grandmother should be happy to help you.'

The more I hear from my...friend about this Granny May, the less I like her. She sounds selfish, and self-centred; incapable of love, or even kindness. I worry that the old woman's aloofness will crush Elizabeth, gentle Elizabeth.

Elizabeth sighs, and a fierce urge to protect her consumes me. I may not have been a friend to anyone before, but I know at least this: friends take care of each other. And I'm beginning to understand just how much I'd be willing to lay my life down to keep this woman's friendship.

'If I asked her,' she grimaces, 'I suppose she would.'

I grin. I, too, have a pride that resents the need to beg for help. 'But you'll never ask!'

'Never,' she answers solemnly, and we laugh companionably.

My tears of laughter are perilously close to real tears. What would Elizabeth think if she knew just how deeply moved I am by such an ordinary moment? To someone like her, friendship must be a normal part of life. How could she guess that I'm sailing into waters deeper than the sea I've never swum in, without even the map of experience to guide me? So I change the subject.

'She gave you the cupboard, though, so she can't disapprove of you.'

'Granny May doesn't exactly disapprove,' Elizabeth says and, the coffee-making finished, she begins to prepare for the day's work.

As she walks to her filing cabinet the early morning sun, peeping through the office windows, accents wisps of her hair. A rush of air, cold and insubstantial, embraces me. I stare at the shimmering light around her head. My back, facing the door leading to the nave of the chapel where that damned wooden crucifix hangs patiently waiting, twitches. It's as if a hand, some invisible hand, moist with blood spilt by a hammered nail, and yet still loving and tranquil, has reached out from the silence of Father Murray's church to rub a circle on my

back. Round and round, like a father soothes his child, I feel the hand work its subtle magic.

In sympathy, the small round scar, marking my palm from long ago, begins to throb and an alluring whisper fills my head. 'Behold,' it says, 'what I offer, when you return to me.'

I scramble upright and, grabbing a ruler, stretch it over my shoulder and vigorously silence both the itch on my back and the impossible voice in my head. Elizabeth, startled, pauses as she reaches into the cupboard. 'Do you want me to scratch your back?' she asks.

Although my soul cries yes, I refuse her offer quickly. If she touches me now...a part of me - the same foolish part believing the nuns' promises that, if I prayed hard enough and long enough, my skin would colour with coffee and I'd no longer be different - that part of me almost believes if Elizabeth, with her golden halo of hair, lays a hand on me today I'll be saved.

'It's gone,' I say, and refocus on her words. 'Clyve's grandmother...?'

Elizabeth unpacks three files: Parish Correspondence, St Jerome's War Relief Fund and Excommunication Requests, and slams the door shut again. She frowns down at them. I suspect she's not going to answer, so I stay quiet, not wanting to push, afraid I've been too bold in my questioning.

'She never exactly disapproved of me.' Her head tilts, and she toys with the strand of pearls ever-present around her neck. 'She gave me these pearls on our engagement. But it's just...'

I keep quiet. I simply watch until she sighs and adds, 'It's just that Granny May has always been...eccentric.'

I keep my face carefully blank, allowing only a little interest to fill the emptiness, yet curiosity stirs in me. All I've heard about Granny May has been no different from most other old people, uncertain of the future and petulant with regret that their lives haven't matched the promise of their youthful dreams. 'Isn't it just her age?'

'It's more than that. She's not senile, just distant. She helps people - she helped me when I first arrived. And yet,' she shakes her head, freeing it from some thought I'm not privy to, and then flips the file open. 'She's a hard woman. She helps people, but it's like...like she does it because she must, not because she wants to.'

And her words take me back, back to a place I rarely let myself visit...

The Past, fifteen years ago

'Cathy? Cathy!' Exasperation twines itself in Mother Margarita's voice. 'Where has that child got to now?'

I could tell her but I don't. I press myself deeper into the undergrowth, ignoring the sting of twigs scratching my pale and vulnerable skin.

'Hiding from her sins again,' Sister Johanna answers. Close, she's too close, and I bring all my will to bear to keep myself still. I'm fourteen years old, but already I've learnt I have only myself to depend on. Sister Johanna is one of the first to teach me that. 'She's the devil's child, that one,' she adds. I can easily imagine the sly sign of the cross she makes, to ward off any evil I may bring to her.

'Shush,' says the Mother Superior, 'the child may hear you.' A silence, broken by the heavy sullenness of Sister Johanna's footsteps. Mother Margarita calls again, 'Cathy? Answer me, child. I just want to talk to you, there's no punishment this time.'

She lies, they all do. Every word they speak is a punishment. For - even the plump and maternal Margarita - if they can find a way to evade me, they do. It shows in their eyes, in the way they glance over me and not at me when they speak. And it shows in what they say, when they think I'm not listening. Is it because I'm young, I wonder, that they talk about me when I stand right besides them? Or is it because I am what I am that I'm invisible?

Why, I sometimes ask God, do they hate me? God never answers, but the mirror tells me why. I'm different. A freak. White where there should be black. Red where there should be

white. Brass curls cup my head, when they should be a soft, sooty black.

They hunt me because of Alice. And the others...

All I wanted to do was play with them. The Father brought new toys this morning, after Sunday service, whispering into Sister Johanna's ear as he always does.

The toys were not new. Other children had scuffed the newness off; the paint was dull with loving, the doll's clothes neatly mended.

Today the younger girls got a ball, and we got a game called pick-up-sticks. There were no instructions in the shabby box, held together by worn tape. Sister Agnes showed us how to play it. She let each of us have a turn, testing that we understood the rules.

When my turn came, I lay on my stomach, crouched close to the sticks because my eyesight was already showing the weakness of my kind. I ignored the chatter and laughter of the other girls and, with steady patience, diminished the pile, stick by stick.

As the pile next to me grew larger while the one in front steadily disappeared, the hum of voices sputtered out. Only Sister Agnes murmured quiet words of encouragement until, as I picked up the last stick, she clapped excitedly. 'Oh, well done, Cathy! Look, girls, Cathy's got them all!'

Light-headed with her praise, I proudly held out the last thin spike, grinning foolishly at the circle of faces surrounding me.

'Errggh,' said Alice. 'The freak's smiling.'

'Don't look! Don't look! You'll go blind,' shouted one of the others, I can never remember afterwards who it was. The howls of laughter bewildered Sister Agnes.

'Stop!' she said, 'Stop at once!' Her voice was too quiet, too meek, to be effective. Above the taunts I heard her say, 'I'm going to fetch Sister Johanna!'

I heard the door slam behind her. 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,' I began to pray, my head drooping, expecting what came next. '...upon a little child,' I mumbled, as the first shoe struck.

I've always known, with utter clarity, that they hate me, except perhaps Sister Agnes. 'Pity my simplicity,' I whispered, not flinching because the kicks always came faster when they sensed my fear, 'And suffer me to come to thee...'

Above the scuffles and muted laughter, we heard Sister Agnes's steps, clattering with anxiety, as she returned. Getting in one last kick, 'Don't tell on us, you devil's child, or it'll be worse for you,' Alice said, adding to the others, 'We'll tell the nuns she tripped.'

I still carry within me the rage born in that moment. Without thinking, I snarled. A little snarl, at first, one

they didn't hear above their laughter as they gawked at me sprawled in front of them.

They heard the next one, though. It stunned them into immobility long enough for me to surge upwards. I clenched the red pick-up-stick tightly in my fist, and the force I stabbed with pushed it backwards through the palm of my hand. I ignored the pain, fiercely glad of it as the thin plastic toy became a weapon sinking satisfyingly deep into Alice's leg. I was going to have a small, round scar, but it was worth hearing her yowl in pain, her pack crowding around her, baying their sympathy.

Before they remembered me, I fled. For the first time after causing trouble, I didn't run towards the orphanage chapel, with its soothing smell of incense and the crucifix hanging high above the altar. For when had God ever answered any of my prayers? Instead, sucking the blood from my wounded palm, I ran outside, into the garden, through the rose garden - an exalted name for the three bushes of white roses that Mother Margarita indulges herself with - and flung myself beneath the hedge.

Later, much later, as I lie in bed weeping from hunger and the exhaustion of my penance, Sister Agnes slips quietly in.

'God is your friend,' she whispers to me, pushing a slice of bread, lathered with honey, and a glass of warm milk, into which she's stirred a teaspoon of red wine into my hands. 'Forgive them,' she adds, 'Forgive them,' but my new-born rage is too great. I turn my face away, away from her and her unbearable words. She hesitates, as if she wants to say more, but then she leaves as quietly as she came, and I smell the sweet, sweet fragrance of the single white rose she lays next to my pillow.

The Present

Elizabeth has begun her work in earnest. I'm angry for wasting the last precious seconds of our friendship time on malignant memories. Those phantoms - all of them - are behind me now I'm free to start my new life.

What is it about the people of St Jerome? The old priest with his robes and his herbs calling me from my shadows. Ted, the gardener, his strange eyes and beautiful hands singing a siren's song that almost makes me want to dream again. And Elizabeth...Elizabeth, whose quiet friendship makes that dream real.

Somewhere deep inside me, I feel a blossoming. My tomorrows now hold the promise of more than despair. They carry with them the hope of warmth, of amity and even, perhaps, of love.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

ELIZABETH

The Present

As Clyve drives them through the night, Elizabeth, alone with her thoughts, feels a danger waiting at the Wiseman's dinner party. All the way there, she fights hard to restore her inner calm.

It's years since she's spoken more than a few words of greeting to Wiseman. Years since they've done more than nod vaguely at each other across the room. She still hates him. Hates what he did to her. May God have mercy on her soul for thinking such vicious thoughts, and she rubs a hand over the three gold bangles Clyve gave her, longing instead for the smooth, plastic feel of her old pink Jesus bracelet.

If only Clyve...but he wasn't there, that night on the balcony, and it's her sin. Her sin alone, that she must bear. Her penance, her absolution, is executed each time Clyve comes

home from the golf club, smelling of cut grass and alcohol and masculine camaraderie, and puts his arms around her.

'Do you want me, Bethy?' he'll ask.

And she says yes. Today, always, she says yes, even when she longs to say no, it's sin now, we should be safely married and I wouldn't feel this dirty.

All she feels tonight, however, as they sweep into the driveway of the Wiseman mansion - bigger even than the Templeton mansion - all she feels is an unspeakable, scandalous longing.

'Bloody hell!' Clyve breathes, as he stops the car and a neatly attired security guard - not an unexpected sight in this prestigious suburb, so vulnerable to theft and car-hijackings - politely opens his door, before hurrying around to open Elizabeth's. 'What a view!'

Looking out over the same bay as their home does, this house perches higher on the mountain. The ever-present sea, anointed with ghostly crests whipped up by the strong southeaster wind also lifting her skirt and plucking at the edges of her precariously upswept hair, lies spread out before them.

It lurks, shaded as black as the rapidly approaching night, and foreboding slithers silently through Elizabeth. Something is going to happen. And whose face, she wonders sickly, will the Devil wear tonight: Simon Wiseman's, or her own?

'Bethy!' Clyve waves her next to him. 'This must be a goddamn fantastic view in daylight!'

All she can answer is a sharp, 'Don't swear, Clyve,' and a frown replaces the eagerness turning his pleasant face into handsomeness.

'Are you sulking, Bethy?'

Tonight she's annoyed enough by everything he's done since he came home to let him see it, and damn the consequences. 'I don't sulk,' she says, 'and we're already late because you wanted to...you wanted...I'm sure we're the last guests to arrive!'

'But a guest worth waiting for,' a smooth voice, as tempting as the sea, surrounds her. A hand slips high around her waist, high enough that his thumb brushes the underside of her breast.

Tonight Elizabeth isn't worried about mended underwear. She's wearing expensive French lace. It's the instant recognition sweeping through her that terrifies her. Wasn't nine years long enough to forget?

She shifts away from that enticing hand. Her skin, wrapped in the frivolous black crêpe, is not as willing. It keeps the memory of his hand; she feels the outline of it throbbing, there, just under her left breast, pulsing and beating with an illicit, erratic yearning.

'Sorry we're late, Sim,' Clyve - dear Clyve, a good man, her saviour, she once hoped - abandons the view. Taking his

place by her side, his softer grip doesn't alleviate the imprint of Simon Wiseman's mark. 'We got a bit delayed. Couldn't help it,' he says, and grins.

Elizabeth cringes inwardly. Clyve, in some peculiar man-speak that she can't see but understands from the way Wiseman's gaze slides up her body, lingering on that provocative glimpse of cleavage revealing white, white flesh still bearing the faint rasp of Clyve's beard, has told Wiseman just what delayed them. Sex, it whispers in her head, that Devil's voice, Wiseman's voice says, dirty dirty delicious sex.

'Lucky you,' he says, and grins back at Clyve, but his lazy blue eyes call to her weakness. He stands there, so tall, so beautiful - can a man be beautiful? - and she sees it in his eyes. He knows. He knows. Even though she washed, and dabbed on more perfume, he can smell it on her. And it excites him.

She wants to weep with despair, for she has no-one to save her except herself, and she isn't strong enough. Not then, not this time, not ever. Not since she took off her Jesus bracelet.

'Let's go inside,' Wiseman says to them. 'I want you to meet my wife.'

What woman does a man like this marry? All that she is not, Elizabeth suspects. Rich and beautiful, confident and sophisticated, accepted wherever she goes, by the sheer virtue

of her name: Wiseman's wife, The Brumer Pharmaceuticals Heiress.

She feels her shame crawl to life in her again. Elizabeth Johnson, daughter of a country drunk, will always be on the outside. Always an outsider, never one with them, not even when she becomes Mrs Clyve Templeton.

It laps at the edges of her control, rising until she's almost choking on it. And when Clyve, obeying Wiseman's inviting gesture, guides her into an enormous entrance hall, all sharp steel and brilliant colours, as empty as Wiseman's soul, she has to blink away her fear as she greets his wife.

Carol Wiseman doesn't surprise her at first. Tall, elegantly dressed, she's an easy and gracious hostess. There's a subtle confidence in her stance that eats at Elizabeth's already fragile control, telling her, as it does, of a lifetime at the top. No shame for this woman; no father to drown her future in his sins as he drowns himself in booze and self-pity.

'Clyve Templeton, and his fiancée, Elizabeth,' Wiseman says. 'I told you about them.'

Elizabeth, so sensitive to nuances, so aware of rejection by those she longs to call her friends, shudders as husband and wife exchange glances. They despise me, she thinks, because I'm from the country. I'm still the milkmaid to him. How would he see her today if she'd said no then? For years

afterwards, in the aftermath, she lies awake and wonders how different - easier - her life would be if only she'd said no.

She finds she still has some strength left to draw on, or perhaps it's the comforting clasp of Clyve's hand covering hers as he chats easily to Carol Wiseman, before drawing her into the inner circle. 'This is Elizabeth, my fiancée,' he says. She's grateful for his money that buys her the dress, and for his love that doesn't question the cost, because at least there, in her appearance, she can have pride.

'My dear Elizabeth,' Carol Wiseman says, 'Simon never told me you were so glamorous.' She draws Elizabeth's arm through hers, and saunters with her into a large dining room, where several other couples wait, their clothes and the judgement in their eyes putting her at a distance. 'This is Elizabeth,' Carol introduces her, 'she's one of the Templeton wives. Or will be, soon enough.' They all relax, and smile at her, the reserve in their faces loosening in an inaudible sigh as they realise she is, after all, one of them.

The room they sit in is a good reflection of their hostess. Elegant, refined and as long and narrow as Carole Wiseman is tall and slender, it takes Elizabeth's breath away. She's never encountered its like before, not even in the city.

When she first met Clyve he was the epitome of city-polish to her. Tonight, against the backdrop of this stark house, with the minimum in furniture and, what there is of it, all chrome and mirrors, angles and leather, he's out of his

depth. The misfit soul while she, in her sexy dress and happiness at being one of them, fits into the dinner crowd like a foot slips into a shining glass slipper.

The house is a marvel. If Elizabeth saw it in a magazine, she'd dismiss it as cold, and dangerous, wondering what - if any - normal emotions live in the people who stay in such a place. But Carol Wiseman surprises all her prejudices out of her. She's all that Elizabeth expects her to be, but also so much more. Sparkling, and friendly, she puts Elizabeth at her ease in the group.

'Your dress is lovely.' As the other women pause in their talk to inspect the black dress with assessing eyes, Elizabeth runs a barely trembling hand over the skirt, nervous that Carol, like her husband, can sense the residue of Clyve's ardour. 'Where did you get it?' her hostess asks.

Relieved at the innocuous question, Elizabeth has enough experience of the city to answer easily.

'Oh, some boutique,' she says casually, which is not a lie. 'It's an old dress I've had for ages,' which is a lie. When she hears a dark chuckle in her soul, she reassures herself that it's a small, harmless lie. One that doesn't hurt anyone, but gives her a much needed veneer of sophistication.

'It's lovely, just lovely,' Carol says, and slips her arm around Elizabeth's waist, coincidentally resting it exactly where her husband's handprint still reverberates along

Elizabeth's skin. 'And my husband has a lot to answer for - insulting you as he has!'

Just what had Wiseman told his wife? This woman who is everything Elizabeth longs to be and - do miracles happen? - who is so accepting of Elizabeth. Has she heard of Elizabeth's sin? Of the evil in Wiseman calling to Elizabeth even now, as he leans against a wall beneath a compelling painting of violet and seductive scarlet, watching them...watching her?

Before she can thaw her frozen muscles, and run, run to Clyve's side where she's safe, Carol continues, and Elizabeth can breathe again.

'Simon told me you were pretty,' Carol says, her hand around Elizabeth's waist stroking up and down, almost absent-mindedly, it's done so naturally. 'He should have said you were beautiful!'

Elizabeth, glancing up into her open, friendly face, sees only what she wants to, and blossoms.

'You're too kind,' she says, torn between her awkward awareness of that feminine hand on her body, the creeping delight of acceptance, and Simon. No, Wiseman. She's never allowed herself to think of him as Simon. Somehow, for what he is, for what he did to her, it's too intimate to think of him as Simon.

Does Carol whisper his name in the heat of their couplings?

The thought, terrible in its detail, makes her head spin and spin and Carol's lips open wide in a grin, a death's head grin, eyes burning into her soul and then the name curls around Elizabeth in a rush of steam.

SSSsssimmmmonnn.

The other woman's face is melting with an inner heat; Elizabeth feels dizzy. Lifting a hand to her head, she turns her eyes away from the exotic overlaid face, that isn't the face of Carol Wiseman anymore but the face of all her temptations swarming in on her.

SSSsssimmmmonnn.

Suddenly he's there, his smell, O God, his glorious smell, and another smell, this one safe. Clyve. That's right, Clyve, she loves him and sobs his name, and the hands are all on her, clutching, lifting, walking. 'Clyve,' she cries again, wanting him to save her this time, please save me, please, please.

But her love leaves her in Wiseman's arms. Walking next to Wiseman, he scolds himself. 'I should've noticed she wasn't all right, she's been different to her usual self all day.' Clyve pats her hand, the one clutching Wiseman's shoulder as he carries her up the stairs. 'You should have said you weren't feeling well, Bethy. Why didn't you say?'

She can't answer him. Can't hear him, for he's lost to her, lost in the feel and smell and taste of Temptation. All she can do is close her eyes, a flimsy barrier at best, and

reach for a greater defence, the word of God, save me, oh Lord, save me, but her God has been silent for too many years.

Aaaah, her soul cries, pain pounding her like the nails pounded into the hands of her Saviour, will my sin be ever before me? No-one answers her, except Wiseman's wife who says, 'Put her in our bedroom, darling. She can rest awhile, and come and join us when she's feeling better.'

'I should take her home,' Clyve says, and Elizabeth groans agreement, but Wiseman drowns the puny sound. He slides her out of his arms onto his bed - his marriage bed, she realises with inarticulate loathing - and says to Clyve, 'No need for that; she's already getting the colour back in her face. Let's leave her alone for a while.'

His breath scorches her cheeks with memories, hot, enticing memories of that other time he leant over her like this.

Have mercy upon me O God...

And perhaps God is still there for her after all. A God who hears her plea, because Clyve, thinking of Wiseman's father-in-law he's yet to meet, and fishing trips he's yet to go on, but only if Brumer's Pharmaceuticals buy his pharmacies, agrees. They leave her there, shivering and shaking as if she's survived Armageddon, and she's grateful for the respite.

Later, when the only sound left is the voice inside her head, Elizabeth opens her eyes and stares around the room.

Another surprise, like Wiseman's wife. She has to stop herself from sobbing at the thought of Wiseman's wife, sure that she's made such a fool of herself that she's lost all chance of friendship, with her stupid faint, her loss of control. What happened, Elizabeth? she asks herself, what happened?

Looking around the immense white room, she finds the answer. Painted a pure white, the room is full of innocence and light, truth and hope, the only colour provided by the dark green leaves in a bowl of white roses standing on a table between two easy chairs near a central fireplace. It reminds her of the innocence she lost. The innocence Simon abused.

And she slumps back into the eiderdown and remembers how her life has changed.

The Past, nine years ago, June

In a few short months, her life has gone from hopeless to hopeful. When she arrives at the Parish of St Jerome and Father Murray takes her to Granny May's she fears the old woman, fears what she thinks of her, this matriarch of a wealthy, city family. Clyve changes all that. Since buying her that pink silk dress - since she lets him kiss her - their love changes her world.

When she arrives at the Parish each morning to begin her day by preparing Father Murray's coffee, she works

automatically, while her mind flies free with dreams, and no regrets.

She dreams of the time when she'll be Mrs Clyve Templeton. 'Soon,' Clyve promises, as he rolls over on his back, still holding her in his arms the first time she let him make love to her. 'We'll marry soon.'

In the musty cupboard of her soul, she doubts. Her Father made too many broken promises. Then her heart speaks, and she believes Clyve.

The hand carefully measuring out coffee grains pauses in mid-air. She takes a deep breath of pleasure before serenely continuing her task. Surely, Elizabeth thinks, such a beautiful expression of love between two people can't be a sin, even if they aren't married?

And she has no regrets about leaving her father after her mother dies of worry and shame. None whatsoever.

The Past, nine years ago, January

She worries about leaving her younger siblings, but she strokes her pink bracelet, a perfect fit now that she's older, now that she's grown into it. w.w.j.d? She rubs and rubs the bracelet, thinking of her mother's death and what's left for her. Her father, his drinking worse now that his wife is dead. Three younger siblings, all relying on her to replace their

loss. And her, Elizabeth Anne Johnson: at barely twenty years old, what does she have to offer them?

The answer comes to her one night as she sneaks the children back into their beds from behind the cupboard where she hid them when her Other Father roared into the house, bellowing and punching anything that moved and anything that stayed still. Jesus. Jesus will take care of them.

The next morning she goes to Father Devin.

'Bring the children to me,' he says. 'I'll make sure the social welfare sends them to a good church orphanage. What about you?' he then asks. 'What will you do?'

'I'll manage,' she says, and clutches her bracelet. He frowns, chewing his bottom lip. Then he sits at his desk and writes on a piece of paper.

'Go to the city,' he says, 'to the Parish of St Jerome. My friend Father Murray will help you.'

And she leaves without a backward glance, her faith all in the vision offered by the suffering face on the crucifix hanging high above the school gate, promising a better life, a safer life.

She arrives in the sea city, the big city, far from her past. Her faith wavers when she meets Granny May, and sees the immensity of the city. It's Clyve - her other light, her other saviour - who soon strengthens it again.

Lying in his arms can't be a sin. She's happy. For the first time that she can remember, she's happy. And safe.

Clyve works hard in the string of pharmacies he inherited from his grandfather Harry jnr. And, in those early days, before he becomes comfortably domesticated and worried about The War, he plays hard as well. Some weeks they're out every night, visiting the opera, or meeting with friends in restaurants that have Elizabeth gasping at their luxury. Or they'll spend the day on someone or other's yacht, sailing round the bay, while Elizabeth hangs over the railings staring deep into the green mysteries of the ocean, thinking about Noah and the floodwaters rising and rising. When they stopped did he, like Elizabeth, feel the sense of having experienced a miracle? A miracle of love?

And so, quietly, she thrives. Sitting in the background, observing the other women, learning all she can, Elizabeth Johnson sets about becoming the future Mrs Templeton.

Until she meets Simon Wiseman again.

The Present

As she lies on Simon Wiseman's marriage bed, she realises it's too late. She has lost her miracle, she is drowning. Her eyelids flutter open in a desperate attempt to hold back the floodwaters. But the dominating white of his bedroom is too piercing, too painful. With a groan, she closes her eyes

again, unable to prevent herself from plunging back into the murky depths that have held her captive for nine long years.

The Past, nine years ago, August

'So the milkmaid's not so innocent anymore, is she?' It's months since she first heard that voice, but she recognises it from the thread of dark amusement fingering along her spine, making her think of love and man, good and evil. Clyve's friend, Simon Wiseman, has found her again.

'You've moved in with Templeton,' he says, 'Getting a taste for city life, are you, Milkmaid?'

As always, she takes refuge in dignity. 'I beg your pardon?' Holding her face in a pose of polite enquiry, she turns to face him. 'Do I know you?'

He laughs. A deep belly laugh that throws his head back, his eyes such a dark, seductive blue she suddenly finds it hard to remember what colour Clyve's eyes are. 'Oh, you're good, Milkmaid. Ver-r-ry good! You've learnt a lot. What else have you learnt, I wonder?'

He observes her with cloudy purpose, and Elizabeth clutches her glass, a pale spritzer, not enough wine to give the soda a kick, but enough to make her feel she's become a sophisticated woman-of-the-world. She didn't like this man when he first tried to kiss her, and she doesn't like him now, for he unsettles her in ways she can't control. She shivers,

the wine in her hand lapping against the edge of her glass in a vague warning she doesn't heed.

She's more confident these days. The thought of Clyve's promise - the vision of being the reputable, the acceptable, Mrs Elizabeth Templeton - makes her bolder than, she realises later, she should be. Taking a sip, she lets her eyelids droop over her eyes in the way she's seen the other women do, and says in insolent challenge, 'You're mistaken. I would've remembered you.'

She's secretly delighted when his eyes heat with the same fire that warms Clyve's face at times. Except this man's eyes carry something else in them, something tempting, something just out of reach that draws her, lures her, and yet repels her. But she's so enthralled she ignores the danger. Soon he's standing closer, and lifts another glass of wine from the tray of a passing waiter. It tastes stronger and she wants to ask him to put in soda to weaken it, but she doesn't want to be gauche, so she leaves it, sipping again and again.

Then they're outside - and years later, Elizabeth, lying on that white coverlet, flings an arm over her face to block out the memories - but it's too late, they're indelible. She's back with Wiseman leading her outside.

'The moon is incredible,' he says, and it is. The full moon shines over them, turning everything silvery surreal. Elizabeth drinks in the sight even as she drinks from her wine glass. The mellow air, the silence of the night, trickle into

her blood with the alcohol. When Wiseman bends his head and touches his lips to her neck, she only sighs deeply, raising a hand to stroke his cheek to see if it feels as silky golden as it looks.

And Wiseman - his bewitching eyes glowing deeply - turns her into his embrace. Kissing her lips, her breasts, her secret place the night air cools even as his lips set it aflame. Soon, Elizabeth is gasping and shuddering out a release even as Wiseman moves between her legs and shows her what her control has always denied her.

'Why?' she sobs later, leaning back against the low balcony wall, holding her pale pink sweater, the one Clyve bought her, against her nudity; she never wears pink again, not after this night. 'Why couldn't you leave me alone?'

He riffles through her bag and takes a tissue. Casually, he uses it to wipe himself clean. 'You were still too innocent, Milkmaid,' he jeers, and laughs a sunless laugh, that almost, but not quite, drowns out the rasp of his zipper being jerked back into place. 'Much too innocent.'

And, where once there was a warm flicker of hope in all it offered her, the extent of the city's danger suddenly chills her. 'You're evil! Evil!' She crosses herself, too late. And longs for Clyve, to save her from this nightmare. Or for her Jesus bracelet to give her strength, to cover her shame so clearly revealed by the brilliant, merciless gaze of both the moon and the man.

Wiseman only laughs and coolly tucks in his shirt, which in her passion she'd torn loose from his trousers. As he turns and leaves her he says, 'Whatever I am, Milkmaid, you're the same.' He looks at her with remorseless calm before adding, 'Because you could've said no anytime.'

And there - right there as the moon's light ripples across the dark waters of the silent sea - Elizabeth accepts she has finally lost all control and kissed the face of her demon.

The Present

Her eyes start open, her legs thrashing around, consumed with a restlessness Clyve has never been able to satisfy since she first kissed her demon. All she can taste is the Devil's smell, and the wild longing that's been building in her all day reaches a crescendo. Exploding deep within her, she's crying, gasping out great heaving sobs. No matter how well she hides it, no matter how she fights it, Wiseman was right. She's evil, as evil as he, because what she can never forget, what she remembers every time her love lays a hand on her, is that she never feels with him what Wiseman made her feel that night she learned how to sin.

It takes Elizabeth a long time before she's ready to join the others. She wants to be certain that she has every leak in her control blocked, every unravelled thread in the mask she wears sewn back tight enough to withstand an evening in Wiseman's company. She has to be mature about this. Clyve has made it clear he wants to do business with Brumer Pharmaceuticals. Wiseman won't be going away any time soon.

Her thoughts falter for a moment. Would tonight have been different if she and Clyve were already married? But she's convinced, in the part of her brain always remembering her shame, that the nine - nearly ten - years it's taken Clyve to keep his promise is another part of her penance.

After Wiseman, after finding such passion in the arms of evil, she has to wait patiently. She must endure her clandestine sin until God forgives her, on the perfect day when she becomes Mrs Clyve Templeton, before the eyes of God and the congregation of St Jerome.

She draws a shaky breath, pressing a hand into her stomach, her flesh pale against the black crepe dress, black as the devil. Did she fail another of God's tests today when she bought this dress to show Wiseman he hadn't destroyed her? Vanity is a sin, but she couldn't fail Clyve, could she? Clyve, in his love for her, her saviour, her redemption, her buttress against the Wisemans of this world and, these days, much more real to her than a God she never sees, even though she prays to Him daily.

And, although the image gets fainter every year that passes, she remembers the crucifix hanging high above the school gates. She survived her childhood, she thinks, and she'll survive this. She'll go back downstairs, and face Wiseman.

It costs her, oh how it costs her, to slide off Wiseman's bed. But she does it, and tugs her dress straight, then hides the ravages of memory, and of guilt, behind a smooth new layer of make-up.

She'll tell Cathy about this, she decides. Telling Cathy will be like a confession, because the albino has no-one to tell her secret to. It'll be a purging of the last of her sin. As she leaves the white room so redolent of Wiseman, she feels light-headed with hope. For perhaps, she thinks, perhaps if this time she faces Temptation down, she'll finally come to the end of her penance. The end of her torment. And then, if she doesn't fail, God will forgive her and she'll become the impeccable, the pure, Mrs Elizabeth Anne Templeton.

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

MAY

The Past, June

It costs me, oh, it costs me, to turn away from Enoch's gaze, but I don't fail this time. Throwing my head back, I let out a heady laugh, feeling light-headed with success, and I lead them all through to where I've laid out the tea.

Later, when they've gone home, I corner Harry.

'Did you see that look he gave her?'

He's struggling with a button threatening to pop loose from his striped pyjamas, and a strip of pink flesh peeps through at me. Out of nowhere, I realise I've never seen my husband naked. I prefer it that way, for it's safer in the darkness. For, separated from the twin bed Harry sleeps in by a broad wooden cupboard, when he asks me politely if he can make love to me, I find it so much easier to say no if I can't see the pleading in his eyes.

So why do I care what he's like under the concealing flannel? All men are the same, no matter what mask they wear. Too easily enticed; too weak to resist the evil of Mayflower, so it's better, far better, to keep her buried at the bottom of the ocean and them at a distance, in another bed, all nakedness covered up.

'Who?' Harry asks now, and I sigh. If he married me for my strength, I married him because he's malleable. And because he's too imperceptive to discover that Mayflower still exists, molten into the core of May's steel.

'Enoch. The way he stared at your mother today.'

Now I have his attention. Although he likes Enoch, he loves his mother and she's a wealthy woman. She brought a hefty trust fund into the Templeton family when she married Harry snr.

'How did he look at her?' he asks.

I hesitate. How does one describe it? 'Lovingly,' is the best I can do.

'He's years younger than she is!' His mouth pinches with distaste. 'Do you mean-' he breaks his words off, knowing I don't allow any improper talk. But his concern for his mother overcomes his usual obedience to my rules. 'Do you mean...sexually?'

I shake my head. Enoch's effect disturbs me enough that I don't shudder when he uses that word. 'With love. Affection.'

'Oh.' Harry's mind works slowly through the information I've given him. 'Don't worry then, my dear.' He pats me clumsily on the shoulder. 'He's obviously grateful to Mother for the help she's giving him.'

He keeps his hand on my shoulder and, when I don't shake it off, the patting turns into stroking. His breathing gets shorter, although he tries hard to keep it even, for it

displeases me when he loses control. I don't agree with him - there's more between them than mere gratitude - but I find myself more interested in Harry tonight.

I've managed to put him off since we conceived Harry the Third, here on this bed. Sometimes I wonder if he has a mistress, some low-class woman who enjoys his attentions in exchange for a few trinkets he buys her. I should dislike the thought of him being physically intimate with another woman. Instead, every night he doesn't touch me, I'm euphoric.

For then Mayflower rests easy, and there's no silent weeping in the oppressive gloom once he's gone back to his own bed.

Why, then, should I question what suits me? After all, I'm Mrs Templeton, and divorce is unheard of in this family. Harry has no complaints; none that he speaks of, anyway, and I fill the role of Wife as if born to it. Like Grace was born to it; and soon, soon, it'll be me everyone fondly calls Mrs T, for Grace is old, and fading, although Enoch has given her a new lease on life.

Harry's hand, uncannily warm tonight, even through the thick cotton of my nightgown, slides over my breast. We've made a baby together; we've shared a room for sixteen years and yet my naked body is as much a mystery to him as his is to me.

'Please, May, darling.' His voice is thick with that indecent desire Mayflower incites in men. But it's not

Mayflower who draws this heavy desire from him, it's May. And the knowledge sears me that May and Mayflower are one and the same.

The yearning, that vague melancholy that's recently been gnawing at my will, gathers strength as he adds, 'Let me love you tonight, darling, I'll be gentle. I won't hurt you,' he promises.

'Switch out the light,' is all I say, and he inhales sharply, before fumbling with the light switch, and sliding beneath the covers.

'Thank you, May, darling, thank you,' he whispers.

And Harry, dear sweet Harry, who understands how much I hate this part of being a wife, considerately moves my nightgown aside only enough for his weakness, his manpart, to tear inside my body, searching and seeking for Daddy's little Mayflower.

What Harry never knows, as he climbs on top of me, is that May lies still, rigid with a fear she refuses to submit to. Fighting the nausea, fighting the helplessness as she closes her eyes, so she can't see my Daddy's face looming above me as he answers the call of that bitch, that whore, Mayflower. Mayflower, who entices strong men into a shameful, muffled ecstasy.

My Daddy came to me the first time after my Mommy went away. 'Our love must be secret,' he said, his head thrown back, his hands kneading my titless body, as me, May and

Mayflower all sink deeply into the oblivion of a sorrow too great for a little child to bear.

Harry grunts his pleasure, before rolling off me with a small kiss of thanks on my cheek. He returns to his own bed, where his contented snores fall into a rhythm that slowly soothes my clenched fingers free from the coverlet so I can slip into another restless, shallow sleep.

As always, after I've let him touch me, Harry is jovial the next morning, while I am surly.

'What are you doing today?' he asks, piling his plate high with bacon and eggs, sausages and toast. One would think he fully satisfied his base appetites last night, but Harry would be voracious if I let him.

'You don't need all of that,' I say and, dutifully, he puts a single strip of bacon back in the dish.

'Whatever you say, dear.'

He grins a silly grin, chasing my gaze away because, seeing it, Mayflower dares to whisper to me that the love shining from those pale blue eyes is worth even the sticky groping of his shaded desires. What terrifies - and excites - me is that since Enoch came, since he and Grace smiled at each other, May is listening: listening to the cries of Mayflower. And wondering. Always wondering. About love and about what love promises.

Harry chews placidly on his sausage, while I, I am being shredded.

'What are you keeping busy with today?' he asks.

Understanding me, aware that I can hardly bear to answer him the morning after, he doesn't wait for my reply but flips open his morning paper.

'We have a Hunt Ball committee meeting this afternoon,' I say over the crackle of crisp newsprint, 'but first I'll probably visit your mother.' And Enoch, Mayflower whispers, but I ignore her, only adding, 'She may need some groceries. I'll get Elijah to drive us in the Rolls, and you can take the new car to work today.'

Slowly he lowers the paper. His face, loose from satiation, has a stunned blankness to it. Much like the expression on my Daddy's face, the last time he recognised me. As if he's thinking: 'What's come over you?'

It irritates me, that look. I jump up, going to the server to pour myself a coffee. But the tremble in my hand slops a ragged stain over the pure white sheen of the tablecloth, reminding me too much of the first time Daddy visited Mayflower. Afterwards, bundling up the white sheet, with its bloody evidence, he comforted me, saying, 'Don't cry, Mayflower, Daddy's little Mayflower, it won't hurt again. I love you, darling. I won't hurt you again.' He lied. It did hurt, again and again, until May was born and - when she grew strong enough - ended the hurt forever.

'May, dear...' Harry is hesitant. He senses I'm not myself, but he's too used to me being in control to believe

it. He can never truly take advantage of my vulnerabilities, because I so rarely show him any.

He begins again, 'Why, May dear, that's a wonderful idea. My mother will like that.'

I tear my gaze away from the mess I made, and vigorously pull on the bell cord to summon Beulah to clear the spilt coffee.

'Enoch will be there as well.' I watch Harry carefully, anticipating another subtle attempt to wrest power from me by using the ungodly menace of the stranger against me. When he shows no reaction, I relax. That particular war is over, since I let loose the winning shot by inviting Grace and Enoch for tea.

Until that look, until I saw the love Grace draws from the tall stranger, I would've found excuses - as many as necessary - to stay away. But May's yearning, Mayflower's joy, is too strong and I dream of a time when I, too, can draw from Enoch the same passion, the same love, that sparked between them.

'He's a good man,' Harry says. 'He'll help you, dear,' and there's nothing but polite interest in his face as he disappears behind his paper again.

I'm almost disappointed. Where is the challenge? The counter-attack? Why doesn't he try to exploit my vulnerability to Enoch? After one minor skirmish, does he no longer care about the struggle for power in our marriage? It can take me

weeks to subdue him if he decides to be stubborn. And I begin to wonder if I haven't finally won the war that's been raging between May and men from the day she arose.

Beulah hustles in and, all the while I'm giving her instructions on cleaning the mess I made, I'm fretting over Harry's meekness. Always a dove, never a hawk, Harry yet fights for his supremacy. He likes to be the boss in our marriage; it's what the Bible, Harry's blueprint for morality, decrees, after all. Wives, submit yourselves unto your husband...honour thy father and mother...thou shalt not kill...I'm supposed to believe the words of a God who has never been there for me? I want to laugh aloud at the notion.

I'm an atheist because May will never be a Mayflower. May does not obey, she rules. And she'll never submit to a man's power, nor to the power of a god who, allowing Mayflower's evil to exist in the world, yet calls a doomed soul into obedient submission.

And there lies the root of my dilemma with Harry this morning. Was my submission last night - my loss in one small battle, caused by my curiosity over the warmth of Harry's hand on my breast - all that it took to win the greater war?

A feather brush I can't yet see has wrapped itself around the core of May's steel. As sturdy as I've always thought it, the curl of a new uncertainty has the edges of May crumbling, leaking until I don't know where she ends and I begin.

It is the stranger's fault. Enoch. He taught me to doubt. What else will I learn from him, from those long slender fingers I imagine drifting over piano keys, kissing the ivory with the soft delicate touch of a lover? Swift eagerness fills me; making me as impatient as a young girl on the way to her debutant's ball, her future spread out bright and shining before her.

I must, I will, see Enoch today. I give Beulah one last instruction. 'And tell Elijah to have the car ready in half-an-hour,' I say. 'I've lots to do today, and he mustn't be late.'

The old man isn't there when I walk out the front door. I stand waiting, a new pill box hat on my head, matching my lavender shoes and purse, deeper and richer than the insipid lilac Grace always wears. It's not a colour I feel comfortable in, so I've teamed it with charcoal, a striking combination, powerful and elegant at the same time. Exactly how I like to appear.

Tired of waiting, edgy with annoyance, I stride around to the garage to find Elijah. The old Rolls stands gleaming, the sun's intensity giving it a sparkle that can only come from hours of loving labour. Elijah isn't there either. When I find him, alone in his small room, tucked away at the back of the old stables, my shoes are dusty, and my pert hat drooping.

I've never bothered with the servant's quarters before; there was no need, as long as they do their jobs. It's only Elijah's disobedience which has brought me here, but the solitude of the tiny room snares me, strangling my anger. Through the small doorway, I see him, slowly, ceremoniously, donning his chauffeur's uniform.

First, he lifts a clean white shirt over his scrawny, singlet-covered chest. Then, he slowly rings his neck with his navy tie, starred with gold and, with a short sharp tug, centres it.

Next, he shrugs into the jacket, braid streaming round the cuffs and bold brass buttons dancing down the middle. I stare at him with wondering eyes, and he pauses. Solemnly inspecting his appearance in the mirror, Elijah then pins a small piece of green felt, decked with a silver star engraved with the letters C.O.S., to his lapel.

Then he turns and lifts his chauffeur's cap. Holding it high, he worships a God only he can imagine. 'Ei, ei, ei, Elijah. It is time,' he says aloud, stoically shaking his head. 'It is time.' Then, finally, he plops the cap on his head and tilts it at a jaunty angle.

Like an ancient charioteer, he's ready now, for any battle of the highways, and picks up the keys to the Rolls. Tossing them in his hand, he whistles a vigorous march, but stops dead when he sees me waiting.

'Ma'am May, you did not need to come for me,' he smiles.
'There is no hurry. The Master will wait, for Elijah comes.'

'It's not Master Harry who needs the car today. I want it,' I snap. 'And because you didn't listen to my instructions, I'm going to be late.'

He shuffles towards me, the keys jangling in his palm and across my nerves, not a sign of remorse in his grizzled black face.

Gesturing for me to move away from the doorway, he says, 'Shhh, Ma'am May, be still, be quiet. There is yet time for all that is to come.'

His startling dignity as he dressed diverted me from the original reason I sought him out. I'm furious with him for challenging my authority. And for his rambles that make me so uncomfortable.

'I run this household, Elijah. Not Master Harry. Not Ma'am Grace. Me! Ma'am May! You obey me!' I shout at him. All the stupid old man does is look serenely back. 'I can still fire you, Elijah. You're not too old,' I add. 'Remember that.'

'Ei, ei, ei,' he croons, 'so much anger; so much hurt.'
He dares to touch my cheek, much as Grace did once before. 'Be brave, little one,' he murmurs, before I can object to his touch. 'Choose well, and there will be no more sorrow.'

The tempo of his words draw from me a longing, prophetic in its depth, for pardon, for liberation. And Mayflower, awakened by Enoch, crushed again by May, hears his sweet

voice. She stirs on the ocean floor, stirs in her darkness; and I hear her weeping.

Before he sees my weakness, I swing away from him, unable to say a word, unable to chastise him for disobeying my word. For making me late. And for making me feel what I don't want to feel.

I wait at the car. Every sense stretches behind me to listen to the huff of his breathing, his old man's shuffle, as he comes alongside me and opens the door for me to slide, with blessed relief, into the murky interior of the car. He takes his time starting the car, this ancient chariot he loves as much as Harry does.

'Where to?' he asks.

'Take me to Ma'am Grace,' I say, 'and hurry.' I hear his meek 'Yes, Ma'am,' as I slam the window separating us shut and he steers the car at a stately pace down the driveway. Not even the sweeping view of the sea can hold my attention for long today.

Hauling out my compact, I stare at myself in the mirror, not recognising the face reflected back. Blurred lips, puffy cheeks and an unfamiliar glint turning my eyes from steel-grey to soft silver.

What's happening to me? I can't answer, and so I spend the rest of the trip repairing the ravages of an inner disintegration, unexpected and unwanted.

When we draw up to Grace's cottage - small, certainly, after the spacious Templeton mansion, but more than adequate for her needs - I've subdued the churning restlessness, the havoc of Mayflower's siren song. She barely whispers the stranger's name as I climb out the car and he is there: at the bottom of the porch, one long, elegant foot resting on the lowest step as he cleans his shoes with a rag.

'Enoch,' I say, calmly, ignoring the swift surge of pleasure. 'Are you well?'

I'm sure there is an equal pleasure in his ambiguous gaze. I wait, soothing my sorrow with promises to explore whatever it means. Enoch straightens to his full height, and I'm little again, smaller - and more innocent - than I was before even Mayflower existed.

A tin of polish sticks out of the top of a small wooden box next to him; and a brush, stained brown with his labours. The faint blue tattoos flash and L-O-V-E disappears into P-E-A-C-E, P-E-A-C-E into L-O-V-E as he folds the shoeshine rag into a neat square and drops it back into the box, nudging the lid shut with his toe. 'I am well,' he says formally. 'And you?'

'Also well,' I say, and run out of words. All my years of practice; all my hours of etiquette lessons, and when I need them most they desert me. I search my mind, but it's a tablet which Enoch erases simply by his presence.

'Are you here to see Grace, Mrs Templeton?'

He looks at me, such a look as I've never felt before, and the promise in his eyes sends me cascading over a precipice I never knew was there. Floating from my throat, a voice touched with such downy eagerness I can scarcely believe it's my own, says, 'Call me Mayflower.'

'I will,' he replies, and it's then he smiles at me. He lights up from within; a dazzling light, making me blink. I'm sure there's another face there, one I don't know, and yet familiar, because I sense it's been with me, in me, all along.

Startled, I jerk towards him, hearing the echo of my invitation, and stop abruptly. 'May,' I say loudly, too loudly. 'Call me May, is what I said.'

'I will,' he says, and my thoughts stutter into life again, as he takes my elbow and guides me up the stairs to a chair on the porch. 'Let me fetch Mrs T. She's working in her vegetable patch, but she'll be pleased you've come to visit.'

'And you,' I burst out, and lick my lips, dry despite the expensive lipstick. New on the market, it's supposed to have a moisturising effect. 'I've also come to you.'

'Yes.' He sighs another smile, and I am lost, lost to Mayflower's clamouring, lost to May's yearning. For that smile blisters my heart and promises me a world I cannot comprehend: the Eden he shares with Grace.

'I'll be here...when you're ready,' he says, and disappears into the house. I blink, foolishly seeing him seep

through the walls, but then I notice the door he must have used.

'I'm ready now,' I whisper to no-one, except the shadow of Elijah patiently waiting by the old Rolls.

What am I ready for? Deep inside myself, living below May, below even Mayflower - in that better part of me no-one has ever touched - I perceive that whatever Enoch brings me will calm the ocean of darkness consuming me.

Then they are back, Grace's head not reaching his breast. And her face - oh God! her face! - rouses in me such evil it rivals the iniquities of Mayflower, and the sins of May.

Grace shimmers with joy, with peace, her grey hair shining in a silver halo around her head. There is that love again, that all-encompassing, all-embracing oneness between them, which makes it difficult for me to make out where she ends and where Enoch - my Enoch - begins.

Grace claps her hands delightedly. 'May, dear. You came!' She turns, searching for Enoch. He glides across to her and, tenderly, almost like a lover, pushes a grey curl, fallen loose from under her pale lilac hat, a pillbox merrily tilted behind her ear.

'I told you she would, Mrs T,' Enoch says, and they share a glance of such love, such devotion, I'm jealous.

So horribly, horribly jealous, the edges of my view melt with it, until I see them twice. Not in duplicate, but twice: for they're there, and not there. And what's there is just a

tall man bending solicitously over an old woman. And what's not there is a glowing golden light, slowly becoming one as they leak into each other, consuming and joining and then fading back into two again. Then, as the haze in my eyes clears, Enoch steps back to close the door behind them, then clasps her elbow and leads her out onto the porch where I wait.

I crush my bright lavender bag, the metal clasp, absorbing the heat of my fury, burning my palms. I gasp with pain, and the bag tumbles to the ground, spilling its secrets, while May and Mayflower rival each other with their cries of woe, until I cannot move for the cacophony they raise inside my head.

'Ei, ei, ei. What's this, Ma'am May?' Elijah is there; he has come in from the shadows. He stands over me, between me and the other two. His old man's bones creak as he sinks to his haunches, scooping up the bag and its contents, while I stare at him numbly. As he hands them back to me, his brown eyes are solemn under the cheerful peak of his cap. 'Be still,' he murmurs, 'Be still. There is yet time.'

His rambles coalesce into a great and unexpected insight. Yes, I hiss to myself, there is still time. I am young and Grace is old, and there is still time for May to take all that Grace was born to, and all that Mayflower was denied.

'Thank you, Elijah,' I say. Regretting my earlier threats to fire him, I want to reassure him that I've forgiven his

earlier transgressions. 'Master Harry is right when he says you're the only driver the Rolls can ever have. He says, no-one else will drive it.'

Elijah bobs his head so vigorously his cap is in danger of falling off. 'Master Harry is sometimes too clever,' he chuckles, his old wrinkled face alight with some secret glee as he thumbs the tilting cap back and, his chest strained by too much laughter, he starts coughing.

It draws Grace and Enoch out of their union, and they hurry towards him, Grace smiling at Elijah, asking how he is, clasping his hand gently between hers, as Enoch pats his back until the coughing fit is over.

Then we're all headed to the Rolls, and I slot away every action, every expression, the old woman used. It'll come in handy when next I have to visit the sick, when Grace's time is over and mine begins.

'Harry phoned me and told me you were coming to take me shopping,' she says, 'But I thought you'd be too busy.' She slips her hand over my arm, and I'm unable to pull away as I usually do, for Enoch is watching, his grey-blue gaze absorbing, assessing. 'Will you come with me to the farm, dear? The children need supplies.'

With Enoch there, walking not a foot away from us, I can only say a simple, reluctant, 'Yes.'

I hate that road - it twists and turns through a wasteland of stony hills, until breaking free into the

flatlands. But there is still no escape from the desolation, for Grace's strays fill the Templeton farm: the poor, the sick, and the needy. Children with eyes too big for their faces; adults with the dumbness of poverty leaching the life out of their limbs. More than the dust chokes me when we go there; memories rush in, and I've come too far to let these pieces of human driftwood destroy all May has fought for.

Today, I will go with Grace. Perhaps, then, the watchful gaze of Enoch will shine with approval, as well as with appraisal, and he will accept that I can offer him a love greater than that he receives from Grace.

We stop at the corner grocery store, and Grace - using Templeton money, I'm sure - stocks the boot of the Rolls full. Soon we're leaving the sea and the city behind us. There is little conversation between us; the hum of the car's engine, and the muted sounds of Enoch and Elijah chatting in the front seat, lull us into that pleasant realm halfway between sleep and wakefulness.

The cars passing us diminish in number as the road climbs upward; eventually, even Elijah runs out of conversation and I find myself slipping deeper into sleep. When I first see the horsemen, I don't realise I'm not dreaming. Four men, draped in an absurd mixture of flowing black robes and khaki uniforms, are riding alongside the road, waving ancient rifles, shaking them in the air. Incredibly, they're gaining

on the Rolls, and I watch them dreamily, not believing they're real.

'It is time,' I hear Elijah say.

Enoch leans across, and grips his bicep. 'Have courage, my seer. The Master is with you.'

And Elijah, swathed in the same dignity as when he donned his chauffeur's uniform, gives him the giddy smile of a child who knows his father has come to take him home. 'I never doubted,' he says, and carefully pulls the old car to a halt.

Chaos erupts. I am awake, I realise, and this is real. Across the worn leather seats of the car that took both Grace and me to wed our husbands, we stare at each other. Will this be our hearse as well as our wedding chariot, we wonder, as the horsemen mill around shouting in a foreign tongue and waving a flag I recognise as that of the rebel insurgents of the land to the north of us? A land torn asunder by The War; by corruption and violence; poverty and starvation. What is this band of scrawny soldiers doing so far south, marauding our hills?

I never thought The War would affect me. How could it, when it's far away, beyond our borders? Grace, fluttering with fear, looks first at Enoch, but his attention is all on Elijah, and so she turns to me.

'May, dear,' she quavers, 'what are we going to do?'

My tongue is frozen. I can only reach out and grasp her hand, for my comfort or hers I can't tell, and I remember the

Hunt Ball meeting I have this afternoon. Will Harry only hear about the tragedy that is about to befall him - the loss of his wife and his mother - when the committee telephones him to ask where I am? We shift closer together, until we are one in our uncertainty.

Elijah rubs his hand over his silver badge and, as he reaches into the cubby-hole and takes out a small leather book I recognise as a Bible, I remember what those letters engraved on the star mean. Church of Sion, and Elijah is a lay minister. I want to weep for his innocence; to tell him his faith and his book are useless: they never saved Mayflower and they won't save us now.

Then Elijah, sharing one last glance with Enoch, climbs out of the car. Shrouded in his dignity, ignoring the anarchy around him, he shuts his door. Straightening his cap, he slips the Bible onto the car roof and solemnly opens the back door of the vehicle for Grace and me. Enoch climbs out too, and comes to stand behind him. The horsemen, staggered by the two men's courage, fall silent, the only sound the scuffling of the horses' hooves, puffing up plumes of dust that settle on my smart lavender shoes as I step out into the danger that awaits me.

Grace follows, and we cling together as one of the horsemen, a young rebel, not as well disciplined as the others, lets out a shriek. Bending down low on his horse, he rips the pearls Harry gave me for our wedding anniversary from

my neck. He holds them aloft and they dribble out of his clenched fist as he shakes his arm in victory.

The scent of their depravity is strong; the young one's greed, his zeal to take what is not his, feeds his evil, and that of the others. The horses, sensing their masters' eagerness, begin to neigh wildly, their hooves a dusty susurrus.

I wish fiercely I had my Daddy's gun. It'll help more than Elijah's stupid doctrine. But the gun is long gone; the last time I saw it, it lay, wrapped in plastic, on the judge's desk. I am defenceless again: as weak as Mayflower ever was. Grace, shivering violently, clinging to my arm without a sound, is no use. I turn back to the car and see Elijah pass Enoch his bunch of keys.

'Take care of the madams,' he says and folds Enoch's fingers tightly over the car keys.

Enoch, his face strained, a drop of perspiration running a white rivulet down his cheek, nods. 'I will,' he promises and walks towards us, leaving Elijah alone at his post. And Elijah, a serene smile on his face, lifts his Bible again, and peers up at our captors.

The air shimmers and a wind, like no other wind I've felt, wraps itself around us as Enoch reaches our side and holds us in his embrace. His elegant hands are firm in their hold, pushing our faces into his chest, and all else except the slow thud of his heart under my ear recedes into a muffled

roar. I jerk my face free, but cannot speak, for what I see and what I hear makes me wonder if this is not, after all, a dream.

We no longer exist to the horsemen. Only Elijah. He stands there, his bowed back straight, his cough silent for once, and opens his small Bible. Once white, now cream with age and use, the embossed gold cross glints in the sun until it blinds me. I want to close my eyes again, bury my head in the safety of Enoch's shirt, sweet-smelling with cedar wood, but I am captured once again by the simple grandeur of my old chauffeur, Elijah.

Unwavering, even as the rebels shove him with their feet, push him with their horses, he staggers, but does not fall. He holds his centre, his piece of green felt with its flimsy silver star, and reads from his book, his voice pulsating with a peace that drives the horsemen into a frenzy.

'Yea,' Elijah quotes, 'let them turn every one from his evil way.' The first bullet hits him, splattering blood over his hands, over the cream leather with its gold cross, and still he forges on, the four horsemen screaming in fury and fright. 'Let them turn from the violence that is in their hands...' Finally, his voice weakens and the book tumbles from his hands. He falls to his knees, his white shirt crimson, his face beatific, and he cries, 'Master! Master!'

I want to run to him screaming, 'Leave him alone! Leave her alone!' Am I here or there, in Mayflower's bedroom?

There's so much blood. It's not Daddy dying for there are too many bullets. And a thundering fireball flings us to the ground and the unearthly wind roars to a crescendo before my world falls into silence.

After a while, I lift my head and look around me. I see the scattered bodies of the rebels, dead every one, burnt ashes to ashes.

And I think I see Elijah.

Arising from the flames consuming Harry's beloved old Rolls, his chauffeur's cap at its usual jaunty angle, he drives an ancient chariot. As I watch, the image disappears into the billowing clouds of smoke enveloping us in the aftermath of a malevolent evil I thought I'd never experience again.

My head, aching from tension and fear, falls back onto the ground. And, as I lie there, with my face in the dirt, tears I've never cried before - no, not even when Daddy slumped dead against May's breast - stream off my chin quickly soaking into the dry and desolate land that cradles all of me, body and soul, body and soul.

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

CATHY

The Present

'Ted's new to the Parish. An outlander,' Elizabeth tells me. 'He arrived a few weeks before you did, asking for Elisha Murray. I almost sent him away. He was so rough, I thought he was lost, or a troublemaker.' She huffs a little laugh. 'But he's an old friend of Father Murray's. He must have borrowed his car ages ago.'

'His car?' I ask, for Father Murray never drives anywhere.

'Ted gave him back some car keys,' she says, 'and when Father Murray eventually stopped crying - from happiness he said afterwards! - he asked Ted if he was to stay and work in the Parish gardens. So he stayed.'

I suspect that Elizabeth has the same reservations about Ted as I do. I say nothing, though. I could be wrong. Perhaps

it's only my own ridiculous notions about him that make me hear wariness in Elizabeth's tone.

'How long will he stay?' I ask casually.

She shrugs, and continues frowning down at the papers she's shuffling around.

'What do you think of these?' she asks, not answering my question. She holds up two pieces of paper. One, a soft pink; the other, an elegant cream and gold. I get up and walk to her desk, to better see them.

I read:

*Mrs May Templeton
requests the pleasure of your company
at the wedding of her only grandchild,
Mr Clyde Harold Templeton,
to
Miss Elizabeth Anne Johnson.*

'Oh,' I breathe, forgetting about Ted. 'You've got the samples of your wedding invitations!'

'I collected them from the printers on my way home from work yesterday.' She smiles up at me, a neatly manicured finger pushing the two invitations around the top of her desk. 'Clyde likes the pink one, but I'm not fond of pink. Which do you prefer?'

I don't answer immediately; I take my time, picking them up, feeling the different textures. The words blur as I try to still my eagerness so I can answer her normally. Does Elizabeth grasp what her question means to me? Such a simple question, such a normal one for a friendship. But, although I forget it in Elizabeth's company, I'm not normal. To share this moment, to have my opinion asked as if it's important...I can hardly breathe. I gasp in a lungful of air to thaw my thoughts.

'What's wrong?' Elizabeth asks. 'Don't you like them?'

I abruptly replace the invitations on her desk. 'The cream one,' I say, suspecting it's the one she prefers. 'I like the cream one. It suits you.'

'Oh, do you think so? It's so elegant and refined,' she replies almost wistfully. And, again, I feel an urge to protect her, but from what dangers I can't begin to guess.

'Like I said - it suits you.'

My words please her, although she doesn't answer. Leaning back in her chair, she places her hands face down on the desk, covering the invitations. The cuffs of her soft lamb's wool jersey - a pale green that makes her eyes glitter like a forest blessed with sunshine after the rain - pull back, revealing slender wrists. The trio of golden bracelets she always wears decorates the one arm; the other has a slim gold watch on it. Suddenly, she crumples the pink invitation, and throws it in the bin.

'Clyve choose this,' she says. 'But I hate pink. It's a colour a milkmaid would wear.'

I bark a laugh at her feigned petulance. Elizabeth is hardly bucolic. In her own quiet way, she has a grace that I lack.

'That sounds good, Cathy,' Father Murray says from behind us. 'To hear you laugh.'

'We're choosing my wedding invitations,' Elizabeth says. 'This is the one I like best.'

As the old priest strolls over to admire Elizabeth's invitation, I move aside. 'Do you want coffee, Father Murray?' I ask, thinking it'll give Elizabeth more time to share her pleasure with the priest.

'Three sugars, please,' he says.

I walk to the counter, surprised to find there's no coffee bubbling away. Elizabeth, involved in her wedding plans, must have forgotten. I quickly prepare the coffee and, while the percolator hisses and spits, I watch Elizabeth.

Her golden head bends close to the tufted baldness of Father Murray; gracefully she digs out the discarded pink invite. The old man's concentration, where he must surely have no real interest, is unwavering. It's a tribute to the love we feel for sweet Elizabeth. Her joy is ours, and it is fitting, for her kindness makes her the beauty that holds the parish together; her faith and her friendship given too generously for her own good.

I take Father Murray his mug of coffee, and his pleasant, round face glows. 'This is a day we've long awaited, isn't it?'

'Nine long years,' Elizabeth sighs. Again, I hear an echo of my own insecurity in her words. Did she think Clyve would never marry her? 'Nine years, and now it's so close I can hardly believe it.'

'Well, my dear,' he says, patting her shoulder as he straightens, 'We'll all be celebrating with you.'

'Of course, you will,' she says. 'All of you! You're the best of my friends!' She includes me in the sweep of her approval. And my mouth goes dry with excitement, my soul freezing with anticipation, as she adds, 'I want it to be the most perfect wedding ever. Of course, you'll be celebrating with me!'

It'll be the only wedding I've ever attended and I'm almost too scared to believe that I've understood her correctly. Does she mean...could she mean...that I, never before invited anywhere, not as a child and most certainly not in the ten years since I left the orphanage, that I, too, will receive an invitation? Just like a normal person. Like a friend.

For the second time since I've been part of this parish, tears spurt into my eyes. I leave the office quickly, not wanting them to notice how moved I am. Some part of me, that part so filled with rage and hate at my colourless skin, still

fears their pity. A pity that is inevitable when they realise that an act so ordinary, so normal - the simple act of a kind person inviting a friend to a wedding - is to me a miracle. For, to one who has never had the luxury of normality, even the most mundane experience can be a transfiguration.

I hurry past the crucifix, its face partially clouded by the trails of smoke drifting up from the incense someone, probably Father Murray, left burning. Briefly, I wonder if more soldiers have died in the escalating War. But a distant tragedy cannot dim my joy - the joy of new possibilities. Despite my evil, my skin, I'm enough of a friend to Elizabeth to be an honoured guest at her wedding...it's almost enough to make me believe again.

'Maybe you aren't a fraud,' I say, and in the dimness of the smoke I imagine a faint smile curves those sad, wooden lips, and I hear an echo of Sister Agnes saying I love you, I love you, I love...

I hurry away from the sound, out into the garden. I must tell Grace, but first I must buy some white roses to put at the feet of the angel guarding her ashes. Outside the parish gates, overlooking the bright turquoise sea, as calm as a deep, deep lake today, the old crone sits as usual, selling her flowers. But today, she is not alone.

Ted is standing there, his back to me, his pianist hands shoved into his back pockets so the faded denim of his jeans pulls tight across his buttocks. His long hair, loose this

morning, trails over the back of his jacket to fall between two angel wings, cracked gold and white where the paint and the leather has worn with age, or use, or both, and I am assailed with the headiness of hope.

Ted who calls to me. I usually evade him, if I can, although the small parish grounds make it difficult. It's his danger that makes me keep my distance, but now, on this day that offers so much, I watch him, as he laughs at the old crone's words.

His head rolls back and the slender silver cross dangling from his ear glints in the sun. He takes a hand from his pocket to sweep it over her wrinkled cheek, his reply an ancient language, one I cannot understand. It flows around me, and over me, and into me, sucking me to the outer edges of safety at the parish gate. I stop, every fibre of my being longing to feel his touch, forgetting the danger, forgetting that - for such as me - there can never be a love like his.

Elizabeth's friendship is the only pinnacle of human love I can ever aspire to. Yet, I ache for more. I want to throw off my past, shed it like a snake sheds its skin, but love is a betrayer. Just as Sister Agnes was a betrayer.

And my rage roars to life again. I clamp down on it, hard, as I learnt to do in the past decade, where softer emotions such as love and forgiveness had no place. But the longing is so great, so overwhelming. To feel that long slim

hand touch me just so. Touch me with want, with need, for who I am beyond the skin, who I was before I was The Freak.

An innocent child, neither innocent nor child any longer, but a woman who cannot be a woman. One filled with rage and evil, hatred and betrayal, until they are so much part of her, I can never be other than what I am. An outcast, an alien in a world despising difference. A world talking of forgiveness and love, God's love, which is as big a lie as the love Sister Agnes showered me with, when I still believed...

The Past

'God loves you, Cathy,' Sister Agnes says, every night after I stabbed Alice. For years, she never misses a night and soon I begin to believe her. I wait, unable to sleep, until I hear those words and smell the sweet scent of the white rose. Deep within me, a feeling grows.

'Help me pull the weeds out, Cathy,' she says, as she carefully tends Mother Margarita's rose garden.

'I need Sister Johanna's advice on this,' she'll add. 'Won't you run and take this note to her, Cathy? No-one else but her, do you hear?'

And I dart through the orphanage corridors, hunting for Sister Johanna, even though she flinches every time she takes one of the notes from my alabaster hand.

'Wait here,' the elder nun orders, without once looking at me. 'You can take my reply straight to Sister Agnes.' So I wait, while she nibbles her pen, and scratches a few words, before folding the paper into a tight wad and pressing it into my hands. 'Don't read it,' she says. 'It's not for your eyes.'

She never calls me by name, that one, not once in all the years that I ran back and forth between the two nuns. I fold my fingers over the note and almost sneer at her. She wants to call me what the others do. Freak. Devil's Child. But she can't do it to my face, for she fears my soul, and so she never calls me anything. That frees me too. I can glare sullenly at her, slamming the door behind me and forgetting that she's already making the sign of the cross to ward off my evil before I leave her behind in my rush to return to Sister Agnes.

One night, I lie lonely and hungry in my bed after another day of penance. Before Sister Agnes leaves me, I raise myself in my bed and, carefully, I lay my head there, on her bosom, where I had seen the naked softness, the glory of her white flesh.

'Ah, Cathy,' she says, in the gentle voice of an angel. I clench my eyes tight. I don't want to see the rejection, when she pushes me away. Instead, she just murmurs sweet words of love. 'God loves you, child,' she says, her hand resting on my

curls and I dream that they're brown, and soft, under the tenderness of her touch.

'Do you love me, Sister Agnes?' I dare to ask.

'Yes,' she sighs, almost immediately adding, 'God loves you.'

So I close my eyes and sleep the sleep of the good.

With Agnes to love me I begin to hope again.

'You're good for Catherine,' I overhear Mother Margarita say to Agnes. 'The poor child is calmer now; not so troublesome.'

I smile, for Agnes's love fills me with a goodness that eats away at the darkness raging every time someone hates me without looking at who I am beneath my skin. I keep busy, helping Agnes with her chores. I follow her into the small chapel of St Jude. There, together, in a comfortable silence that speaks of love, we clean and dust the dullness into shining gold.

'You must kneel and pay reverence,' Agnes says, as she passes the small altar and crosses herself.

I refuse, at first, for my knees ache with too many penances. Eventually, though, the joy Agnes feels in that quiet corner, where the sounds of the orphanage are distant with peace, becomes my joy too. Sometimes, I kneel with her, touching without touching, for the shield of her goodness

blankets me, until there is no way I can tell where Agnes ends and Cathy begins.

There comes a Sunday when, after the priest with his charity toys has left, the notes between Agnes and Johanna stop abruptly. That night, when Agnes brings me my white rose she says, as always, 'God loves you, child.'

I rest my head on her breast, and ask again, 'Do you love me, Sister Agnes?' I close my eyes, anticipated pleasure already feeding the heart that grows bigger with each drop of Agnes's love.

Tonight, there is no answer, and my heart begins to shrink again. I jerk away, but she stops me, clutching me harder to that soft bosom, so I choke for lack of air. But I don't care, for tonight is special. Tonight is a night when miracles happen. The sobs crowd her chest until there are too many for her to contain. Her tears fall on my face, and on my head, but I forget them, for this night Agnes, my Agnes, says 'I love you, I love you, I love you...'

The liturgy of love continues until it saturates my soul, overflowing into my body. I feel alive, fully alive, my girl-woman breasts aching and my womb tingling as love, God's love, Agnes's love - I can no longer tell the difference - garlands me with dreams. I throw off the covers, surging upwards, not afraid, no, never afraid, as God has answered my prayer. He

has sent me a friend; He has sent me a beloved. I put my arms around her, clumsy in my haste, and kiss her tears away.

And I believe.

The Present

The old crone sees me standing by the gate, staring at them. She beholds me, and murmurs softly to Ted, nodding towards me. Ted turns and his smile lights up his face, much the same as Sister Agnes's face did, after reading one of Sister Johanna's notes.

'Come,' he says, and holds out a hand, the one that has the letters L-O-V-E tattooed on his slender fingers.

'Where to?' I ask cautiously, not moving from the iron bars that separate us.

'To the beach,' he replies, and urges me to join him with a flick of his wrist. 'You've never been there.'

I agree, but add, 'I can't go now.'

He raises his eyebrows in surprise. 'Why not?'

There is no simple answer to that simple question, so I shrug my shoulders in an eloquent reply. How can I tell him it's Elizabeth's company I want; Elizabeth who offers me acceptance and a chance to dance with life at her wedding.

'I have to work,' I eventually say. 'I only came for some flowers for Grace.' With finality, I add. 'And the gate's locked.'

'Go with Ted,' Father Murray urges from behind me. 'He'll take care of you.'

The two men share a conspiratorial glance.

'Thanks, Eli,' Ted murmurs, inclining his head, so his eyes shimmer with layer upon layer of mystery that pin me where I stand. I feel lost, my soul in grave danger, when he says, 'Come with me, Cathy.'

I shake my head. 'Elizabeth needs me,' I say, turning to walk back to the parish office.

Father Murray blocks my way. 'Not as much as you think,' he says. He clasps my hand in podgy fingers. Some scared part of me recognises that, with muscles honed over a decade of hard labour, I can break his grip with ease. Instead, I stand there, letting him turn me back to face what I was trying to escape. He unclicks the gate latch with his free hand, swinging the iron bars out of my path. 'There,' he beams as he pushes me over the threshold, away from Elizabeth, into the world waiting for me beyond the parish gardens. 'The gate is open after all.'

I hover there, and harness the spurt of anger that ripples through me. This parish is different, I tell myself; here there are no enemies.

'When do you want me back?' I ask, not quite hiding my sullenness.

'Take your time! Take your time!' Father Murray encourages benignly, as Ted steps forward and takes my other hand.

For a millisecond I hang crucified between them, a conduit for the meeting of their two souls. The force of it makes me sway; momentarily dazzled by a flash of golden light until Father Murray lets go, and I feel the earth beneath my feet again.

'You deserve some rest, child,' he says. 'You've worked too hard.'

I can't shake the feeling that he's not talking about the few short weeks I've been at St Jerome's but, rather, that he's talking about all my life.

As Elizabeth promised, the ocean is soothing. In the rhythm of the waves, and the melodic cry of gulls, I'm almost unaware of the heat of Ted's fingers. The thrum of his body, so close to mine, separated only by a slice of air, is thick with the promise that our separate selves can be easily breached, making us, in an instant, one. But he is silent and separate, and so am I.

Yet, in that silence, my rage - that ever-present rage moulding my life from the day the orphanage girls kicked me for the last time - hears his soothing song. And it settles back into its cage as I watch him out of the corner of my eye. His face is beautiful: would a man's lips taste as sweet as

those of Sister Agnes? I fear the answer for I believed, once, that God had heard my plea.

And I was wrong.

The Past

I started thinking of her as my Agnes from the day I saw her scrubbing herself pure in the bathtub. The image of that white swinging breast fascinated me. It was so devout, so maternal. I wanted to bury myself in it. Suckle it, feel it feed and nurture me in the way the Madonna suckled the Christ-child, her halo shining golden as the child gained its strength from her essence, clean as spring water and as purifying.

After I kissed her, I drink nightly from the fountain of her love. Each time I rest my head on the altar of her bosom, I find the strength to say 'I love you.'

The words fill me with a shade of happiness that suffuses my body, controls it, so another Cathy resides inside my skin. One who doesn't care what the others say when they see me; one who simply smiles at them, smiles from within, from where my Agnes's kisses, her soft words, soothe away the hurt and tame the anger.

One miracle begets another, I soon learn. For, after a while, the orphanage girls stop calling me names. I'm no longer Freak to them, but Cathy. And, for the first time in

all my years at the home, more often than not it is I who receives the chocolate - a nightly treat that's a reward for good behaviour - from the Mother Superior.

Only Sister Johanna still hates. She and the charity priest - with his collection of second-hand toys to make him feel holy - hate me with a disconcerting fervour. They huddle together on the days he arrives to deliver his left-over kindness, and fall silent whenever I walk into the room. The priest's hands, his nails bitten down until the tips of his fingers shine red, pat and pat away at Sister Johanna's arm, her shoulder, anywhere he can reach. She leans in towards him as I sidle past her to collect the box of toys the priest has brought. She whispers her hate to him, and it follows me as I leave the room.

Those are the days my Agnes cries the most. My kisses are helpless against the storm of her tears, and so I weep with her. For her pain is my pain; her sorrow mine, and I protect her as best I can by telling her, over and over, how much I love her, God loves her, I love her...

Then there is the day I walk past the chapel of St Jude, where Agnes and I have spent so much time together. I hear them arguing, Sister Johanna, the charity priest and Agnes.

'Mind your own business, Sister,' the priest, sly with guilt, says. 'It's my vow to break.'

'It's God's vow you're breaking,' Agnes cries. I won't have Agnes unhappy, especially not amid my own happiness. So, instead of walking past, I crack open the door, and peer in on another trinity. Sister Agnes, on her knees, in front of the altar. The other two, facing her, challenging her, with a hatred that, in this quiet place, is obscene.

'You're just jealous,' he says to Agnes, and even from where I stand I hear her gasp of pain. 'Jealous because Johanna cares for me now.' He slides his arm, his black-clad arm, around Sister Johanna's shoulders, black against the white of her wimple, black as the meanness of his spirit, and draws her next to his body. There is no ending between his cassock and her habit, only one cruelly taunting figure that shows no mercy as Agnes's hands fly up to shield her eyes, to stop her gulping sobs.

Then she pulls herself upright, with a simple dignity that makes me aware of the tears flowing down my own face, as she says, 'If I'm jealous, it's no less a sin than you commit.'

'What about you?' Sister Johanna snarls. She pushes a hand against Agnes's chest, against those breasts that have succoured and saved me from the lonely hell the Sister Johanna's of this world would condemn me to. 'You and the albino. The freak. Every night. And that's not breaking God's law?'

'Cruelty is a human law,' Agnes says, softly, sorrowfully. 'There's no harm in showing a child some love.'

'Love!' The charity priest laughs, and my hands clench into fists at my side. The rage I haven't felt for months, for years even, springs alive again. 'That's not love,' he says. 'That's a sin, consorting with a child marked by the Devil himself.'

I want to shout at him that it is love: a greater love than any he's ever known. But all that spews from me is the same rage that poured forth the day I got the small round scar on my palm.

At the sound, they turn as one and stare at me as I clatter down the aisle. They're as frozen as the porcelain figure of the Saint, resting at the foot of the crucifix, even as I reach them and grab Sister Johanna's arm, the one that defiled Agnes's breast.

And, in the smoky chapel, redolent of herbs and incense, pandemonium erupts as the priest grabs Johanna's other arm and claws at my face. I let go and step back, into Agnes's arms, into the safety of my mother's arms.

But the priest is small, and weak, and Sister Johanna is neither. He stumbles and pushes her away so she doesn't drag him down. She falls heavily, and the thud of her head catching the end of a pew sounds like the day the orphanage cook dropped a watermelon, juicily splattering black seeds and red flesh everywhere. She lies still, her wimple skew now from the

force of her fall, and blood dribbles slowly, invisibly, into the black of her habit.

Into the silence Agnes screams and screams and screams. She stumbles to her knees beside the limp body of Johanna, and moans, 'My love, my love, don't leave me, don't leave me.'

The charity priest turns to me, his face flushed, his breathing heavy with panic and self-preservation. 'You did this.' He spits the accusation out, but my clenched fists tell him I won't let him get away with the lie. 'You did it,' he says again, his unforgiving eyes following me as I stoop beside Agnes, putting my arm around her, giving her what comfort I can. 'If you don't agree, I'll say Agnes did it.'

There's no time for me to respond, for the door to the chapel crashes open. Mother Margarita, and the rest of the orphanage, flood in.

'What happened?' the Mother Superior asks, hurrying to kneel next to the two nuns huddled on the floor, bathed in blood. 'She's dead,' she says. Then scowls up at me, standing over Agnes, before swinging her horrified gaze to the priest. 'Who did this to Sister Johanna?'

There is a heartbeat where I am about to speak the truth. Then I look towards the priest. His lips move, forming Agnes's name in a wordless threat. I feel her shaking shoulders beneath my arm, and hear her moans for the loss of her lover. Her real love, which was never me. Could never have been me.

For haven't I always suspected that love for one such as I can only be a lie?

Still, I cannot help myself. The urge to protect her is too strong and my love for her is not yet dead. I straighten, and step away from Agnes, who holds the body of her dead lover so tight against her breast, her wet face stained bloody where she raked her nails down her cheeks in torment. I ignore her, and the priest, and stare straight at Mother Margarita, willing her to believe, knowing it'll be all too easy for her to believe.

'I did it,' I say. 'I killed Sister Johanna.'

I put on my idiot face and offer no further explanations, not even when the police arrive and subject me to the most gruelling interrogation. None are necessary. The truth would be more difficult for them to accept than the lie. Almost as difficult as it is for me to accept Agnes's silence when she lets them take me away. I go, without once looking back.

And I never see her again. My love, my Agnes, whose betrayal lies not in loving another, but in never having loved me at all.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ELIZABETH

The Present

Sitting across a table from Carol Wiseman, in an exclusive breakfast bar she's never visited before, Elizabeth rejoices, for her God has returned to her. The same benevolent God who sent her Clyve, and Father Murray and Cathy - yes, even the strange albino Cathy - to show her just how bright her hopes are, has finally returned.

She wonders if it's a sign that her penance is nearing an end. That of all the women in a world more affluent even than Clyve, it's the wife of her demon, her downfall, who is to be her redeemer.

'Thank you for inviting me,' she says, hearing how her fervour filters through the bland platitude.

'Darling,' Carol says, 'I should be thanking you. One gets so bored with the same faces, the same gossip!' She

reaches across the table, smoothing Elizabeth's hand and her uncertainties with a butter soft finger. 'Don't mind me,' she smiles, 'You'll get used to it.'

The promise implicit in the words comforts Elizabeth, and she relaxes under the steady, soft caress. 'I like it,' she says, and bravely, clumsily, strokes back. 'That you speak what you feel. I can learn from you.'

'Not much,' says Carol, 'but I'll teach you what I can.'

A part of Elizabeth preens. What does this woman recognise in her that she cannot discern for herself? Can she see the real Elizabeth Johnson, buried beneath the years of despair?

'Simon mislead me!' Carol says brightly, and a chocolate-dark laugh, heavy and sweet escapes her, a contrast to her slender form, elegant even at seven-thirty in the morning.

'Simon?' Elizabeth's voice catches on the name. She doesn't want him tainting this time; she doesn't want to think of what Carol will feel if she discovers the weakness, the demon, in Elizabeth's soul. The one called Simon Wiseman.

'My husband.' Carol breaks off a chunk of honey dripping croissant with her fingers, and bites into it neatly. 'Mmmm. Delicious,' she murmurs, and looks directly at Elizabeth, her eyes clouding heavily with an unabashed sensual enjoyment. It reminds Elizabeth of that pristine white bed she lay on, wondering what Simon and Carol Wiseman do, together, in the shade of the night.

'He thinks well of you,' Carol says, and clicks a finger at a hovering waiter to clear up the mess that Elizabeth's clumsy hands make, jerking against the fragile crystal tumbler. The juice spills out over the white, white tablecloth, dripping onto the cold marble floor, and Elizabeth gasps with embarrassment and a horrible, forbidden pleasure that leaps and roars deep within her.

'Of me?' she says.

'You resisted him,' Carol says, and smiles. 'In his bad old days, when women just lay flat for him.'

'I resisted him?' Elizabeth echoes weakly, the slap, slap of heated flesh under a silver moon loud in her memory. And other memories, turning away from Wiseman in the months that followed; staying away from parties where she knew he'd be, these flood her mind, replacing the truth she's lived with for so long, filling her with wonder. 'I did! I resisted him!'

'You did.'

'It was hard,' Elizabeth replies, remembering the long nights afterwards when all the pleasure she'd previously found with Clyve dissolved into an atonement of clumsy grunts and a sweaty, restless need never satisfied. 'To resist him.'

'Simon respects you for that,' Wiseman's wife says, and finishes the last of her croissant with a single, stylishly greedy snap. 'It made me want to get to know you.' She wipes her fingers clean on the white damask serviette, and slides a

complex glance at Elizabeth, half challenging, half appealing, adding, 'If you want to be friends with me.'

If she wants to? Elizabeth can hardly breathe with the excitement. This, she thinks, her fingers toying with the pearls Granny May gave her when she first became engaged to Clyve, is what her suffering was for. This reward she's waited for her whole life, and she breathes a prayer of thanks to a God who suddenly, miraculously, once again ousts Clyve as her saviour. When she gets home tonight, she'll find her old pink Jesus bracelet. And, if she still can't find where she left it, if it's lost or damaged, she'll take one from the stock at St Jerome's. Father Murray won't mind, she does so much for the parish.

'Elizabeth?'

Carol Wiseman's voice has an edge to it, one that fills Elizabeth with her old strength, her old determination.

'It's...you...I'd love to!'

She shivers with a new excitement, similar to the rush she felt when she first resisted her demon. Even though he won the Battle of the Balcony, Elizabeth now feels that she won The War. She'd thought it was fear that devoured her every time she turned away from Wiseman. Now, from what Carol says, it was resistance and her weakness is no weakness any longer.

'Carol,' she affirms, 'I'd love to be your friend!' And, as she speaks, the other woman's eyes gleam with a triumph overshadowing her own.

Elizabeth arrives at St Jerome's late. The albino is there, already working.

'Oh,' she says, remembering that they've fallen into the habit of spending time together each day. 'I hope you didn't come in early today.'

'It doesn't matter,' Cathy says, and Elizabeth thinks she hears a touch of her old reserve in the other woman's voice. A spurt of regret sours her happiness.

'It does. I should have called you to tell you I'd be late.'

'Did you enjoy your breakfast with your friend?' she asks.

'Who told you where I was?'

'Father Murray.'

'Good,' Elizabeth says. 'Then you didn't have to worry.' She lets her happiness free itself. 'Cathy, it was lovely. You'll never believe what happened!'

Cathy gets up and pours Elizabeth a cup of coffee, taking it to her desk. 'Tell me,' the albino says with an indulgent smile.

'That dinner...the one that Clyve wanted me to go to...'

Cathy nods encouragingly, and Elizabeth continues. 'I never got the time to tell you, but it started out awfully and then - ,' She breaks off, sipping her drink and her gaze

glitters with dreams. The albino stays silent, as she always does, letting Elizabeth set the pace.

'I thought I'd ruined my chances!' She grimaces.
'Behaving like a fool. Like a scared little girl from the country.'

'I don't believe it,' Cathy says soothingly, and Elizabeth gives a low laugh.

'If you could have seen me...!' She puts her mug down and stretches half over her desk. There's no sight of the others and she sits back, clutching the albino's arm, tightly, surprised the skin is so warm when it looks so unwholesome.
'Cathy,' she says, with a passion she doesn't often reveal. 'I did it! I salvaged enough from that disaster to make it.'

'Make what?'

'Acceptance. To have those people accept me.'

'That's important to you?' Cathy asks cautiously.

'For Clyde's sake,' she says quickly. 'His business is so important to him. It's been in the family for generations and he has a responsibility to keep it successful. We have to network.'

'Aaaah,' Cathy says. 'Networking,' and nods as if she understands exactly what Elizabeth's talking about, when Elizabeth herself doesn't believe what she says, for this is not about Clyde, but about destroying her demon.

'Was that guy there?' Cathy adds.

'Wiseman?'

'Yeah, if that's his name. The one who bothered you before.'

Elizabeth leans back in her chair, stretching her arms out in front of her, hands clasped outwards. 'Oh yes,' she says. 'He was there, but I handled him!' And she jerks her hands free so the gold bangles she always wears jingle with the release of tension echoed in her contented smile. 'I handled him.'

'Good for you, Elizabeth,' Cathy says gruffly.

Encouraged, hands fluttering animatedly, Elizabeth tells the albino of how she stared a devil in the eye, and didn't flinch. Of how she freed herself from the last vestiges of her father's legacy and, finally, she tells her of Carol Wiseman, her new friend.

'...and I was so thrilled when she 'phoned last night, asking me to join her for breakfast.' She jumps up, excited as a young girl, and hauls her handbag out of the cupboard where she'd stored it on her arrival.

'You'd like her, Cathy,' she says, to be kind - for where would the albino ever get the chance to mix with people like Carol Wiseman? - and shows her a photograph, cut out of a glossy magazine, of the woman, reed-like, and elegant as a mannequin.

'She's pretty,' Cathy says, and adds loyally, 'But not as naturally pretty as you.'

'Oh, Cathy...!' Elizabeth gently dismisses her words. Then, the bustle in the corridor telling her the parish gardener has arrived for work, she adds quickly, 'Carol asked me to have breakfast again tomorrow.' She grimaces with disappointment. 'But I'm supposed to take the proofs of the wedding invitations to the printers!'

'I...I'll take them,' Cathy offers, rubbing her arm where the half-moon imprints of Elizabeth's nails still show. 'If you like. If the breakfast is important to you.'

For just a moment Elizabeth hesitates, wondering what the stationery salesman will think when Cathy, with her outlandish appearance and her abrasive aggressiveness, walks through the door. But, she'll never meet the printers again after the wedding, where Carol Wiseman...oh, she opens a whole new future. 'That would be fabulous, darling,' and it's only when Cathy blinks in surprise at the endearment that she realises how quickly she's fallen into Carol Wiseman's habits. 'Will you be able to come home with me to pick them up? We can have a cup of tea and I'll tell you what changes the printer must make.'

A hint of vulnerability, of loss and longing, deep in the albino's eyes surprises Elizabeth, waiting for an answer. It reminds her of when she first came to the sea city, and prods her into adding, 'You can stay for dinner.'

'I..., ' Cathy clears her throat, 'I don't want to intrude on your time with Clyde.'

'Oh, he won't mind,' Elizabeth says dismissively, confident that Clyve, aware of his family's status as patrons to the weak and needy, won't object to her good deed. 'It'll just be a simple pasta and sauce.'

'My favourite,' Cathy smilingly accepts.

Elizabeth feels life spurting through her veins. With each beat, her lifeblood pumps its power into her. The same power she felt when she stood under the crucifix hanging high above her old school gate. When she rubbed her old plastic Jesus bracelet and when Clyve first made love to her, long before she knew just what Simon Wiseman was.

It's been too long since she felt this surge, this power greater than she, and it's like the purest nectar to her. She savours it, letting it feed her soul and restore her faith. And, as she lifts the phone to tell Carol Wiseman that she'll join her for breakfast after all, she breathes in deeply, absorbing her happiness. God has returned to me, she thinks. He is back, and I have overcome my evil.

When she finishes her call, Ted is in the office. His jeans are dirty, as if he's been kneeling in them, and he washes his tattooed fingers in the small basin near the coffee percolator.

His soap-covered hands swirl under the running water and Elizabeth watches as L-O-V-E rhythmically covers P-E-A-C-E,

and P-E-A-C-E covers L-O-V-E. The blue letters dance into one another and she doesn't know where one begins and the other ends, until she scolds him to clear her gaze.

'You shouldn't wash your dirty hands there!' she says, startling him. 'Pour some disinfectant down the sink when you're finished.'

She gets up and, as she walks towards him, she wants to rain blessings down on them. She is so full of God's blessings herself, she wants to share it with them all, as Carol Wiseman shares her friendship.

So she gives Ted a radiant smile, noticing for the first time his extraordinary eyes, cool and dangerous as the sea that looks up at the mansion in which she lives. Her smile quivers, almost falling off her face, but she has the old power in her, even without her Jesus bracelet, without Clyve, she has it back and she's not afraid when she stares back into the stranger's soul.

'Are you settled in yet, Ted?' she asks, bending down to unlock the cupboard under the sink. Reaching in, she hauls out the yellow and red bottle of disinfectant and places it next to the basin. 'This city takes some getting used to.'

'It does,' he replies. 'But I've been here before.'

'Oh?'

'It was when I first met Elisha.'

'Elisha...oh, you mean Father Murray. It must have been a while back.' In all her years in the parish she's never heard Father Murray talk about him.

'We're old friends,' he replies.

There's a layer in his voice that makes Elizabeth suspect she's missing something. But when she stares at him, in his leather and tattoos, she can't imagine what, so she says, 'That's lovely,' and dismisses him from her thoughts as she returns to her desk. 'Cathy will give you a cloth to dry your hands on.' The albino does so, as well as gruffly, grudgingly, offering him a cup of coffee.

Clyve doesn't blink when he comes home and finds Cathy sitting on the veranda, watching the sun set over the darkening sea.

'Bethy's told me about you,' he says and shakes her hand. Elizabeth can't detect any hesitation in Clyve and she wonders if it's because, in the rays of the dying sun, Cathy's skin is almost human, and her pleasure is palpable, injecting life to its pasty sheen.

'Ditto,' Cathy murmurs, and adds awkwardly, 'I hope you don't mind that I'm here for supper?'

'Not at all,' Clyve says warmly. 'It's good to have a friend of Elizabeth's around.'

'Cathy's going to the printer's for me tomorrow.' Elizabeth tells him why Cathy is there, adding, with a hint of

pride she can't quite wipe out, 'Carol asked me for breakfast again tomorrow, so Cathy offered to take the proofs in.'

'Carol Wiseman?'

Enjoying his surprise, she nods.

'I'm glad,' he says cordially, 'that you're making your own friends.'

Has it been a burden all these years? That she's clung to him, cleaved to him, doing all that she thought he wanted, when all he wanted was for her to be as free as she dreamed of being. Wouldn't that be a waste, she thinks, if I've been busy sacrificing Elizabeth Johnson for Elizabeth Templeton and he doesn't even want the offerings I've made.

A daring idea comes to Elizabeth. Sitting there, hearing the murmur of conversation spring up easily between Clyve and Cathy, she lets it wash over her as the smell of the sea washes over them in a light breeze, chasing away the ordinariness of the day. It's so audacious, so bizarre a thought, she can hardly bear to let it form: was Clyve her Saviour, or had she, all through the long years of her penance, unconsciously held the key to her own redemption?

Carol Wiseman's casual words this morning let Elizabeth into that secret knowledge, and the revelation is breaking the barriers holding the real Elizabeth trapped in guilt and shame.

'I must check the food,' she says, standing up abruptly, needing to escape into solitude, to savour this enlightenment and what it means.

Forgiveness. As she bends over the rich meaty lasagne, the cheese crisped, just the way Clyve likes it, she overflows with a new-found security. A peace, even, that soothes away the long nights of memories, and the days of secret shame. That's the gift her new friend Carol Wiseman has given her.

Forgiveness. And it smells as sweet to her as does the heavy scent of the white roses she picked from the old abandoned rose garden at the bottom of the driveway leading up to the Templeton mansion.

Later, when Clyve returns from driving Cathy home, Elizabeth is lying in bed, waiting for him. But he doesn't see that tonight will be different; more like the beginning, when they were first in love. Instead, he says a muted 'Hello,' and disappears into the bathroom.

When he climbs into the bed next to her she feels his agitation. 'What's wrong?' she asks telling herself she doesn't have to feel guilty any more. Her penance is over.

'Nothing,' he says, and sits up again, irritably pummelling his pillow. But he still shifts and wriggles, until eventually he says, 'Everything.' He sighs. 'Did you listen to the news tonight?'

'I was busy making supper. Talking to Cathy,' she says.
'Why?'

'There's been another escalation in The War.'

Relieved that that's all, she turns to him, hoping he'll notice the nightgown she's wearing, his favourite. 'It's been going on for years.'

She reaches over to touch his arm, tenderly, hesitantly. She might have found her freedom today, but the habit of years is hard to break. Does she have the courage - or the faith - to release the control locking everything she could be deep inside her, where only God and the Devil can smell it, and fight over it? When she's certain God will win, then she'll be able to reach over and fondle Clyve naturally, kiss him with the passion Wiseman drew from her all those years ago, and not lose herself to it.

So, when he returns her touch with a distracted pat, she buries her desire, and asks, 'Was it bad?'

'They've begun a massive offensive,' he says, 'and already thousands are dead. There's a general call out for extra volunteers.' He picks at the lace trimming on the bedspread, his smoothly manicured nails unravelling a loose thread, as he frowns at his thoughts. 'Do you think Granny May's right?' he asks abruptly. 'About my parents' deaths?'

She tells him what he wants to hear. 'They died fighting for good,' she consoles him, 'how can that be a waste?'

'At least they did something,' he says. 'Something real.'

'Of course they did,' she agrees. 'You can be proud of them, no matter what Granny May says.'

'Aah, Bethy,' he says, and encloses her in his arms, so the fire leaps up like it did on that moon-dappled balcony. 'I knew you'd understand. Will you come with me when I tell Granny May?'

Fear, nameless and devouring, douses the flames instantly. 'Tell her what?' she asks.

'That I'm volunteering,' he says, rubbing a hand over her shoulder so his excited trembling shivers into her bones, 'for a six week tour of duty as a medic. Like my parents.'

Through the rushing darkness his words release, the vortex sucks her in and holds her tight, trying, with skeletal claws, to gouge out all the peace she found today. But Elizabeth is strong again. She holds back the hiss of a nameless dread, telling herself that her evil no longer has a face she need fear. And, she comforts herself, even without Clyde, her control will hold and she will still be safe. She will be safe.

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE

MAY

The Past, fifty years ago, August

My Daddy does not die, that day May is born. When she rose out of Mayflower's sorrow and pointed his own gun at him.

'Come now, Daddy's little Mayflower,' he said. 'Put that away. It's not for good girls like you.' He smiled confidently, holding out his one hand and walking towards me, the other already undoing the buttons in his trousers.

'I'm not Mayflower,' I said, as I watched him sit on the edge of her bed. 'I'm May.'

'That's right,' he agreed. 'It's your birthday today! You're fifteen now, a young lady. I'll buy you a pretty dress at the store tomorrow. A lady's dress. You'll like that, won't you?' Ignoring the gun May held, he leaned over and rubbed my breasts, his breathing heavier as he stroked his manpart

through the gap in his trousers. 'But, for now, just be Daddy's good girl again. Let Daddy love you.'

He didn't know May's steel: not even I did until that moment.

'Take your hand off my bosom,' I said, calm and in control, neither my voice nor my hand trembling in the slightest as I added, 'Or I'll shoot.'

He didn't believe me. He just squeezed tighter. So I squeezed the trigger and then there was blood everywhere and Daddy slumped against my chest. Dead, I thought, I hoped, watching his brains bleed all over Mayflower's bedspread.

The door flew open, swinging back on its hinges, as the landlady and her skinny young lover came running into the room. I opened my fingers and let the gun fall. Then I removed my Daddy's hand from my bosom and it slid to the floor with a muffled thump. I looked at them calmly, as they clung to each other, the woman's mouth open and wailing now that it was too late for her to make a difference.

'Be quiet,' May said, as Mayflower sank and sank, deep into the dark ocean waters, to lie there, still and waiting. 'There's no reason to cry.'

The landlady's din gargled to a stop, and she asked, 'Is he...dead?'

'Perhaps,' I said. 'I hope so.'

Her wailing started again while I said not another word, until the police and the medics came and, between them, moved

my Daddy's body away from where it lay across my chest, trapping me to the bed.

'He's still breathing,' the one said, as another wrapped the gun in a plastic bag. For evidence, he said.

And still I did not cry.

I listen to my Daddy coughing, like old Elijah did before he died that dusty morning, another casualty of a war that should never have drifted so far south.

This silent, still old man, as pitiful as he is, is not my Daddy. Yet he is and no-one wanted me to go near him again. Harry thinks he's an uncle, suffering from senility. He admires my weekly visits to the clinic, and happily pays the bills, although he never joins me.

As he has all these years, my Daddy just lies there, wrapped in the innocence he plundered from Mayflower. The scar is still on his head. And in my heart. The judge, the people who became my foster parents, all acquitted me. They said I was too young. That ten years of my Daddy's type of loving had broken me.

They were wrong. It made me. It made May. For it was only Mayflower who was weak and, yes, broken by her evil.

How she prayed to a god who never existed! And talked to a priest, whose only answer was to say, 'Don't tell such lies, Mayflower. It's evil.' He'd cup the top of my head and say a

blessing, praying that his god would remove Mayflower's sin. Then he'd add, 'Your Daddy's a good man. He does all that charity work for underprivileged children!' and he'd send me on my way, with the admonition to, 'Say three Hail Mary's, child, and three of Our Father's. Every day. The good Lord will forgive the sins on your soul.'

Kneeling in front of a crucifix, Mayflower would weep and pray, but her evil was too strong, for my Daddy still came every night until I drowned her in the ocean that was my heart.

Out of her depths May arose. Since that glorious transfiguration I've never prayed again. Not once. Why should I pray to a god who allows such wickedness to exist? Instead, when I sit between Harry and Grace, Saint Grace, in the pews at St Jerome's, I move my lips in time to the catechism but my mind flies free, worshipping what matters in this world. My silver sugar shaker, my solid mahogany cupboard; whatever I can squeeze with my fingers the way I squeezed the solid, real trigger on the gun that banished Mayflower's evil forever.

And there is Enoch. He, too, is real, and precious to me. The new priest, young Father Murray, chants the liturgy with off-key enthusiasm. I dream of Enoch, and the solid safety of his arms around me the day the world exploded into the anarchy of blood and dust and wildly neighing horses.

Beautiful Enoch, sitting next to Grace at the other end of the pew. Always next to Grace, but never next to me.

A touch on my wrist reminds me where I am.

'Visiting hours are over, Mrs Templeton,' the young nurse says. She might be attractive if freckles didn't cover her face and the white cap she wore didn't scrape her hair back. 'Was there any sign today?'

'No movement.'

I rise, gathering my belongings. The small suitcase with the dirty pyjamas I must wash and return next week. My handbag and my jersey, in case the weather turned while I was here, as it often does when the sea is angry with this old city. 'Thank you,' I add, smiling as she rushes to help me. I must have captured Grace's gesture correctly this time, for she blushes, and her mouth opens and closes, until she can't stop herself from speaking.

'You're such a good person, Mrs Templeton,' she blurts, and her freckles turn a deeper brown at her own temerity. 'Visiting your uncle every week.'

'It's my duty,' I say abruptly, disturbed by her words; by Mayflower shifting as she covets the young woman's praise. What will happen if I ever let Mayflower out again? She is becoming too strong for me. To keep her quiet, to keep her silent, I repeat, 'Duty. That's all it is.'

And I leave the room in a rush, for the look in the young nurse's eyes changes from admiration to a soft pity that is unbearable. What is there to pity about me? May is strong; she will always be stronger than Mayflower, and the curse of weakness which consumed Mayflower's life will never again touch me.

I see Enoch the next day, when he brings Grace to clear out Elijah's belongings. They go together. Enoch rests his palm protectively in the small of her back, guiding her away from me. They go to the back of the house where the servants' quarters stand, tucked out of sight of those who don't care to look too closely at what doesn't concern them.

It eats away at me. Here is another who reveres Grace, that mad old woman who sees Jesus in her dreams and talks to angels in my sitting room. I watch until they've disappeared. Then I turn back into the mansion, which used to belong to Grace, but is now mine, and I call urgently for the servants.

When Enoch brings Grace back, I am ready.

'Come inside for tea and crumpets,' I say.

'Crumpets?' Grace asks. 'Not macaroons?'

I can hear she's pleased, but I'm watching Enoch, not her. He blinks with a surprise that pleases me; then a veil drops off his eyes, those eyes which peer into one from the depths of a sea inexorably beckoning one into uncharted

waters. I drop my gaze, half-afraid he's seen into my soul and realises I made the crumpets, not to please Grace, but to please him.

I take Grace's arm and help her up the stairs, and I say, 'Crumpets. Your favourites, especially for you.'

I can only hope he believes me; that it will make him look at me as he looks at Grace. For, since the day I felt his arms around me; since my nose breathed him in, I have longed for him to touch me again. To rest a hand on my back, a finger on my cheek, with the same tenderness he reserves for Grace, Saint Grace, but never for me.

It's because he can sense Mayflower. That bitch, that whore Mayflower, whose clamour for his attention becomes louder each day, until her cries drive me wild and I turn to Harry nightly, politely inviting him across to my bed. It doesn't help, for Mayflower still cries and cries for Enoch; it is only Enoch's touch that she longs for.

'How are the arrangements for the Hunt Ball coming along, May dear?' Grace asks, childlike in her enjoyment of the crumpets, scooping up the last drop of warm honey with a dainty Victorian spoon Harry bought me from his antique dealer.

'We're getting a good response this year,' I say. 'The best. It's been miraculous - we've had donations pouring in from the most unexpected sources.'

They share a glance, which annoys me, so I add stridently, 'I'm the chairwoman this year.' Then I'm ashamed of my boast, when Grace turns her smile on me; that irritating, gracious smile that draws everyone to her. Even I am drawn to it for, as she lays the tips of her fingers on my arm, and bends towards me, I find myself holding my breath, longing for her praise, for her love.

'You've done well,' she says, and I relax muscles I hadn't even known were tense. 'But sometimes a small miracle helps too!' She peeps across at Enoch, her smile saying that they share a secret, a secret that belongs to them, and them alone. One I can never share, for there is a force, an invisible barrier I sense, binding them together and keeping me out.

I stand abruptly, clattering my cup in the saucer. Grace starts at the noise and it pleases me that her bond with Enoch shatters. She starts, but he doesn't move. He just sits and watches me with those sea eyes of his, until Mayflower's longings, her cries - becoming daily as raucous as the gulls circling the distant ocean beyond the mansion gates - nearly defeat me.

I dig deep and, with a smile rivalling her own, I ask, 'Will you be coming to the Hunt Ball this year, Grace? Harry and I have a few seats left at our table.'

'Me, dear?' Grace laughs. 'I haven't danced in years. Besides,' she adds, her smile drifting into a frown, 'I don't like the thought of hunting those poor animals.'

'It's a name, Grace, just a name. One to remind us of the old country.'

'But we're not in the old country now, are we, dear?'

I sigh and agree. Hoping to divert her from another ramble, I say, 'Harry will dance with you.'

'My Harry?' she asks, a light descending on her face, colouring it with love and memories.

'Your Harry's dead,' I say harshly, disturbed by her glow, and irritated, because I never expected her to be this difficult to manage. 'Harry jnr will dance with you.'

'So will I, Mrs T,' Enoch says, his body relaxed but not passive, and soft with kindness, as she claps her hands delightedly.

'Will you, Enoch? Will you come and dance with me?'

I am made weak by his nod; weak even as Mayflower grows in strength. I shiver, suddenly, wondering what will happen to me, if ever Mayflower finally breaks free.

Standing before my mirror, the long one in the bathroom, I inspect my appearance. People tell me I'm beautiful. It's what my Daddy called Mayflower. I prefer to call myself handsome. May is a handsome woman. Tonight, I'm pleased with

my efforts. I look as Grace must have, at my age: elegant and refined, born to the position of a Templeton wife.

Harry comes into the bathroom for me to fasten his bow-tie. As I stand close to him, he absorbs my emerald green satin gown, with its tight bodice and flaring skirt, and he gets that hungry glint. He doesn't understand that it's Mayflower who invites him across to my bed at night. My fingers, busy with the intricate knot, pause as I listen inward, to hear if Mayflower is awake.

Tonight there is no sign of her. No danger that she will rise and consume me with her desires. I allow myself to enjoy the flick of excitement that heats up my body as Harry sways forward, almost kissing me, until he realises it'll smudge my carefully applied make-up. Briefly, as he brushes against my senses, there is a sharpness, a tightening, in my breathing I want to call love.

'May,' he says, clasping my hands and lifting them to his lips, warm, and a little bit damp, even through the black satin gloves encasing my fingers. 'You're more beautiful than ever tonight,' and he presses my hands one last time before releasing them.

'And you're handsome,' I say, not telling a lie. His black dinner suit adds stature to his placidity and, with his thinning sandy hair neatly oiled into place, he looks suave, if a bit uncomfortable, in his evening finery.

The tenderness he evokes in me tonight rises again; too much, too quickly, for it calls to Mayflower. I move to break the spell of that small bathroom, cloudy still with steam from my bath, and redolent with the sharp, spring smell of the herbal oil I used to soften my skin.

'We'd better hurry,' I say, walking past him into the main bedroom, picking up my fur coat. The nights are not yet cold enough, but it adds a final patina of wealth to my appearance that I enjoy. And it goes well with my necklace, restrung after Enoch had picked up each of the scattered pearls from around the body of the young rebel who had died for his greed. 'I must be there early.'

'They won't start the ball without you,' Harry says.

I ignore him, for what I want is to be standing at the head of the receiving line when Grace appears, bringing Enoch to the ball.

They arrive late. So late I begin to think Grace has taken to her sickbed again, denying me this night with Enoch. The excitement quivering through me for days starts congealing into an anger as deep as the one May felt, the day she went to find her Daddy's gun. But before it can grow, before it consumes me as thoroughly as it did once before, they arrive.

Enoch, resplendent in his tuxedo, his over-long hair shockingly tied back with a thin string. His hands, except for the faint blue of his tattooed fingers, are white and pure as they emerge from the blackness of his sleeves. I shiver,

remembering their warmth, their slender strength, as they embraced both Grace and me in their safety, that day we lay face down in the dirt, only Enoch, and Elijah, between us and a miserable, lonely death.

'You came,' I say, looking at Grace, but speaking to him. 'I thought you'd taken ill.'

Grace smiles warmly. 'I came, dear,' she says, turning towards him, giving a little upward peek at his face, sombre and more stern than I've ever seen it. 'I knew how much you wanted us here tonight. Didn't I, Enoch?'

'You should be in bed, Mrs T,' he replies, throwing me a murky glance, one that has Mayflower stirring anxiously, for she doesn't dare risk losing what this man offers her.

Grace clicks her tongue irritably. 'Don't fuss, Enoch, dear.'

'The time is too close,' he says. 'You should be resting.'

'I want to dance tonight,' she says, mischievously. Leaning her head back on his shoulders, her hair shines silver, giving her the face of an angel, the highways of age and sorrow softened by the dull light pouring out of the ballroom.

'You'll dance as much as you want to,' I say.

'Wonderful. Will you dance too?'

'When I can.'

'This is your night, dear,' she says. 'You must embrace it with your heart,' and her fingers gently brush against my chest. 'Dance with all the young men you can, but leave time for Enoch. He's the one you must dance with tonight. He'll make you feel as carefree as a young girl again. Like a mayflower, when it's still young and precious.'

Her eyes radiate a promise of redemption that incites Mayflower. At her name, she surges up from the depths, and I am flooded with the same excitement that consumes her. I can no longer hold back the waves of desire. They rise and rise as Mayflower does, flexing her strength and sucking me into a whirlpool of longing so great, so irresistible, I can barely restrain myself from plunging into Enoch's arms and begging him to love me. To love Mayflower as she longs to be loved, as he loves Grace, so I, too, can wear the mantle of Saint Grace's peace, and Mayflower can destroy me no longer.

Hours pass and I've yet to stand in his arms. Long hours of a loneliness I haven't felt since Mayflower cried so hopelessly in front of a callous wooden cross.

Harry sweeps me out of a vigorous foxtrot. 'I must rest,' he puffs. His face, his so-amiable face, shines with perspiration and happiness as we sit back at the table. Roses cascade down the edge of crystal vases and the heavy silver

cutlery set on white damask tablecloths lends a suitable dignity to the occasion.

'You're both so happy,' Grace beams, clapping her hands together as she often does in her exuberance. 'Are you enjoying yourselves?'

'My wife is the best-dressed woman in the room tonight,' Harry says proudly, sliding an arm around the back of my chair, his fingers playing a tune of pleasure along my satin-covered shoulders. 'She's done the Templeton wives proud.'

I despise myself for the way I bloom under his praise, for I've never needed Harry's approval before. My need dislocates the power back into his hands, and I'm reminded of the way Mayflower constantly sought her Daddy's approval; an approval which only ever came in the night.

He'll need longer than the few minutes rest we've had to catch his breath. But, shifting my shoulders so Harry's fingers slip away, I say, 'Let's dance again.'

'Not me,' he says, exhaling deeply and pulling out his handkerchief to mop his forehead. 'but you dance if you want to.'

'Enoch will dance with you,' Grace chimes in, as I knew she would. 'You haven't danced with Enoch yet.' She looks at him expectantly, as do I, and Harry. Am I the only one to see a flicker scurry across Enoch's face?

The moment I step into his arms, the world - with all its glittering evil - recedes into a dim threat. But he is

uncomfortable holding me so close, and yet we are no closer than he holds Grace. I feel his reluctance, as he holds me, one arm around my waist, the other clasping my hand at shoulder height, as the opening bars of a waltz start. Something fierce and proud forces me to confront his resistance.

'If the dance steps are unfamiliar,' I say, bored and condescending, 'we can return to the table. I wouldn't want to embarrass you.'

Those eyes, oh, those eyes! Flickering with layers, they make me want to weep as I stare haughtily into them. And, in-between the layers, I dream of a young girl, running free. Her dark hair flies out behind her as her Daddy's strong, safe arms pick her up and swing her round and round, until she screams with laughter, her face alive with joy and innocence.

'I can waltz,' he says eventually. 'But it's too soon.'

'For what?'

'Too soon for us to dance.'

'I've waited hours tonight!'

'It's still too soon for us,' he says, 'But you won't understand yet.' His eyes flare with movement and I realise the carefree child dancing in his eyes is me, as we twirl around the dance floor, the sweet music of heaven sounding in my ears.

Letting myself sink into his embrace, I don't even try to fight Mayflower anymore. 'Let's go outside, onto the balcony,'

I say, and press myself against his length. In my imagination I already feel fingers closing over my breast. Not my Daddy's, no; not even Harry's. This time they're another man's fingers, long and slender; graceful as a breath of wind and resonant with my redemption.

He tries to move away, but I cling, I cling so tight his shiver of resignation slides through me as well. But I no longer care; Mayflower will not be resisted.

'It's too soon for you,' he whispers. His breath ripples the strands of my hair falling loose from the chignon with which I'd completed my careful toilette. 'Patience, child, have patience.'

'Now,' I demand. 'Now.'

Perhaps it's because my will is so strong; or perhaps he hears Mayflower's desperation. Whichever it is, on the next beat of music, he swings us effortlessly in a new direction, out of the ballroom and into a dark, isolated corner of the balcony.

I don't wait for him to bend his head. I let Mayflower free. I let her loose. She reaches up and pulls his head down so she can savour his lips. It doesn't feel evil now, this tide that rises in me, it feels like love. And so I show him how I can love; Mayflower's kind of loving. In the safety of his arms, I love him like I loved my Daddy; like I've loved no man - no, not even Harry - since.

For a time beyond time I cling to him until, slowly, it penetrates my euphoria that he isn't loving me back. He stands there, dappled with the moonlight creeping into the corner where we stand, his arms loose at his sides, his body unresponsive and unloving.

All the warmth drains out of me. I am shamed as Daddy's loving never shamed me. At least Daddy's hands held me and he'd confide in my ear that I was his little love, and he didn't mean to hurt me, but love hurts, my Daddy would say, sometimes love hurts. But love has never hurt as much as Enoch's stillness does, as I offer him all the love I have.

I turn away, wiping the taste of him off my lips; gathering myself, calling on May to come forth again and banish Mayflower's weakness, this weakness called love, which only hurts and hurts and hurts.

Before I find myself, Enoch pulls me towards him. I resist, but yield eventually against his irresistible gentleness and I lean back against his chest, his arms enfolding me in a touch as soft as an angel's wings.

'Mayflower,' he sighs. 'Aah, sweet Mayflower,' and his chin rests on the top of my head. He starts rocking me from side to side, murmuring words in ancient tongues I don't understand. They soothe me anyway, and I sink into the comfort of his embrace, waiting for, longing for, his hands to cover my breasts. Perhaps then I'll find the answers I've been

seeking to the restless uncertainties Mayflower has been spawning, since first this stranger came into my life.

'I love you, Enoch,' I murmur, as I often whispered to my Daddy, even when I wept and wished that love could be different. 'I love you.'

'Not really,' he replies. 'Not yet,' and, finally, he sweeps his hands over my body, up and then down again. I feel the same fleeting warmth I've begun to feel when Harry touches me, after I've invited him into my bed. 'This is not love,' Enoch says, pushing me away, rejecting me. The only place we touch is our clasped hands, and our gazes, where he holds me captive with eyes revealing the judgement of aeons.

I begin to drown in those eyes; deep, deep they take me, to the centre of my world, that centre where there are no secrets. There, I delve into Mayflower's face, unadorned except with the truth. I see her tears, and I cannot tell whether she cries for loving her Daddy too much, or for discovering on the day May broke free that love has many facets, one of which is hate.

Gasping, I drag my hands from Enoch's clasp and, drawing all the dignity of a Templeton wife around me, I say, 'We'll forget this, shall we?'

'It's already a memory,' he says, 'but let it be a good one.'

'A foolish one!'

'Love is never foolish,' he says. 'But you're not yet ready to love me.'

He cups my cheek in his palm, and I react instinctively. I cuddle my face into his warmth. What does he want from me? I've already offered him the best of me, the best of Mayflower.

'How must I love you then?' I ask

'Let your heart's voice speak,' he replies. 'And look with your inner eye. There you will find the truth of what love is.'

Before I can answer, before I can ask him what he means, he melts away. He doesn't go back into the ballroom. He walks into the moonbeam, following it off the balcony to the edge of a rose garden, where an old woman waits.

At first I think it's the old crone, the healer woman I once saw in the depths of his eyes. It's only when I lean forward over the railing, uncaring if the late evening damp stains my dress, that I see the silver hair. He has left me to go to Grace.

It's that bitch, that whore, Grace, Saint Grace, who has stolen Mayflower's love. It's not enough the people love her more than they do me. Now she has stolen Enoch from me. And he has left me here, alone and weeping. Weeping for Mayflower, whose evil does not lie in never having loved, but only in having loved her Daddy too well.

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CATHY

The Present

My thoughts have lingered too long on Agnes, but now they turn to Elizabeth, and to the man standing next to me. Elizabeth's friendship, her promise of having me share her wedding day, is enough for me. I'm not interested in whatever it is he is offering. As unbelievable as it seems, that he's offering me a relationship, is becoming more obvious every moment we stay watching the sea.

After a decade of staring at the bleakness of prison walls, I see the ocean stretching to an infinity I can hardly grasp. The waves rush eagerly to greet us; as they come close, the waters slow to a cautious dribble, tentatively touching my toes. Then, as if they too are afraid of my difference, they scurry back in haste, leaving only some seaweed, clinging determinedly to a broken piece of driftwood. Battered and

torn, its green arms mournfully reach out. Then it droops slowly with despair, realising the ocean has left it behind, to face the harsh world alone and unprotected.

It touches me with its loneliness, that lost piece of seaweed, and I'm filled with the urge to save it. To pick it up and throw it back into the safety of the ocean before the sun, harsh and unforgiving, drains it of all its colour, destroying it forever.

But before I can move, Ted steps lightly forward, leaving barely a mark in the damp sand and stoops to pick up the straggling plant, tossing it unerringly back into the ocean from which it came.

'You're wasting your time,' I say.

He smiles, and shakes his head, staying where he is until the next wave comes. It laps at his black biker boots, baptising the bottom of his jeans in salt water, before retreating as inevitably as the earlier wave did. This time, though, all that's left on the sand is a few flecks of foam, quickly soaking away into the faint hollow of his footprints.

Walking back to my side, he announces, 'The ocean has accepted its return.'

He slings a casual arm around my shoulders. And such is the day that, without flinching, I leave it there, tempted even to lay my head on his shoulder. But that would be too dangerous, for it reminds me of when first I laid my head on the soft and welcoming bosom of Sister Agnes.

'Not for long,' I say. 'It'll spit it out on some other beach where people don't care. They'll just leave it to rot.'

As he looks down at me, his eyes flicker with mystery. 'Not everyone would,' he replies.

Somehow he has sensed I'd been about to do what he has already done. My only answer is to shrug myself loose from his hold. I turn away, heading back the way we came. 'I must get back to the office,' I say. 'Elizabeth will worry about me.'

'Elizabeth worries about herself,' he says. 'Not anyone else.' There's a thread of warning sewn into his voice which annoys me.

I swear at him, a harsh word and ugly. Then, 'Elizabeth is my friend!' I snarl, and stretch my legs into an almost-run, wanting to escape his disturbing presence, and the confusion he draws from me.

'Did you learn that in prison?' he asks mildly. And he's right next to me, keeping pace with me, no matter how fast I power myself away over the clinging sand. 'It couldn't have been the nuns who taught you.'

I slam to a halt, swinging to face him. 'What do you know about me?' I grab his arm and twist my lips at him, not a mask now, for I am furious. And somehow shamed that this man, of all men, has learned I spent the last ten years locked in a prison.

She's capable of murder, they said. She stabbed Alice in the leg, they remembered, forgetting all the good I'd done in

the orphanage since first Agnes loved me. In the end, they called it accidental manslaughter, but every time I think of Agnes, silently watching them lead me away, I call it betrayal.

Ted shrugs, but not hard enough to dislodge my grip. 'I know enough,' he says.

The rage explodes again, destroying the contentment of this day which almost restored my hope. I felt safe here, amongst these parish people, and yet this man's insight into what should be secret threatens me. These days, however, I no longer let the rage master me. I learnt, that day Sister Johanna died in a pool of blood, that rage can sometimes be cold. And the colder it is, the more I can let it work for me.

Calculating how much force would hurt him without breaking his skin, I dig my fingernails viciously into his arm, deep into the small tattoo that blares "*Faith & Hope & Charity*". I step up close to him. Close enough that I notice the way his beard nudges through the pores of his skin, darkening his chin with a stubble as black as his hair. He is beautiful to me, so beautiful an ache begins within me. I have to crush his face from my vision: I see only inward, into my anger, into my hatred and into my fear.

'Who told you?' I shake his arm, digging deeper, and still he doesn't flinch. 'Who?'

He shrugs. 'It's a small parish,' he says, 'I hear what I need to hear.' He looks at me steadily, with that strange gaze

swirling around and into me, until I feel faint with I know not what and everything disappears. The beach, the sea, the cacophony of gulls, all fade. Soon, all there is left is him and me, and he whispers, 'When will you be free, Catherine?'

'I am free,' I whisper back, even though I want to shout the words. 'I am free!'

'You're out of prison,' he says, and with gentle fingers easily prises my nails out of his arm. 'That's all.' His eyes, grey and gloomy as the ocean when ignorant clouds obscure the sun, fill with tears and I can't stop myself from falling...

...down I go, down into his vision. There is a poor, terrified creature, trapped in an old hayloft, shivering as the sounds of the mob baying for her blood fade into darkness.

She shivers as I did, that day the orphanage girls crowded round me, kicking and snarling, before my rage emerged, making them fear me more than I feared them. I want to kneel next to her; to wrap her in my arms, for she is such a pathetic bundle of rags. But her face: her face is lined with wisdom and pain, for all that is best in her is what makes the others hate her.

I gasp out my sisterhood with her, a sisterhood forged in the alienation from all that is normal, and heaven help those who fall outside that strictly guarded border of the land called normality. For the citizens of that land will want to conquer; they will want to invade and consume and devour until

there is no difference left, until there is only normality and a sameness that is safe. Safe for them, at least. Not for those of us like this sad, scared soul and me. For heaven, with all its gods, hasn't ever helped either of us. We are the sinners, the lost ones, and our greatest sin rests in our differences from all the others.

She shifts, suddenly, and tilts her head to listen, as if she hears the small sound of despair I make. Then she pulls herself upright. A trembling hand holds fast to a strong wooden post for support, and she arranges her face in a snarl that would make her fearsome if I hadn't recognised the loneliness lurking deep behind the ugliness. I've practised that grimace myself, in the small mirror hanging above my bed in the cell that was my home for so many years.

'They're coming back,' she says loudly, in an ancient tongue I've heard before, but only now understand.

'The innkeeper is a good woman,' another voice says in the same language. 'She'll lead them away and you'll be safe.'

'Will I?' she asks. Then she sinks to the ground in her exhaustion. 'Will I ever be safe?'

'Trust me,' the voice says...

I recognise that voice. It's whispered through my dreams every night, since first I came to the parish and met him as he slouched in a pew in front of the altar at St Jerome's.

'Trust me,' Ted says again.

I blink rapidly. Then I can only see his eyes, not the shadows dancing in them, and squint around me, surprised there's no change in the small world surrounding us.

We still stand on a deserted beach, just him and I. And I finally succumb to the temptation. I rest my head on his shoulder, and let the tears come. Self-indulgently, selfishly, I cry for me. For all that I have lost: my Agnes, my innocence, for the me I could have been had I some colour to my skin. But - most of all - I cry for the faith I abandoned years ago, somewhere along the dreariness that is my life.

He enfolds me in his embrace, his elegant, incongruous hands firm in their hold. He pushes my face into his chest. All I know is the sweet cedar smell of his shirt, and the soft soothing sounds of an ancient promise that I am loved.

I am loved.

It's a lie I've heard too often from Agnes, and one I no longer believe is possible. I wrench myself away from him, running as fast as I can, my only thought to reach the parish office. And Elizabeth. Elizabeth, who is my friend; a normal, uncomplicated woman, whose kindness to the lost and lonely person I was on the day I arrived at St Jerome's has rekindled the hope I'd thought lost forever.

This time I run alone. Ted stays where he is and, as I begin to climb the steps that will take me off the beach and into the road where the church grounds nestle, I turn back. He stands there, watching me, his long hair lifting gently in the

sea breeze which has sprung up, and I think the sun glints silver off what might be tear tracks crawling down his cheeks.

I wipe my own face, and take a few deep calming breaths. I am as ugly when I weep as when I am angry. Uglier, for tears make me weak, and vulnerable.

'Where is the young Master?' the old crone selling flowers asks, and I am jerked back from my self-pity.

'I left him on the beach.'

She struggles upright, resting her hand on the gate post behind her. In her face, and in the way she moves, I imagine a greater affinity than one forged in the times I've bought flowers from her, when I visit the parish Wall of Remembrance.

'You'll not escape him so easily,' she says.

I give her a dull, sullen glare because, of course, I was running away from him, still shaken, and made vulnerable, by my tears. It's years since I last allowed others to see my weakness. No-one's kicked me, or betrayed me, since I hid my tears behind my rage and I won't let that change now. Not even because of a stranger's concern for a piece of dying seaweed, and the smell of cedar-wood as he stroked away my sobs.

'I'm not trying to escape him,' I say eventually, not sure if I'm lying or not.

'Good,' she smiles. 'Good!' Then she rustles among the buckets holding her flowers, her clothes, ragged and dirty with age and poverty, brushing against the blooms, knocking a few petals off the older flowers. 'Aaah!' she says, as she

finds, hiding beneath the aspidistra and daisies, a small bunch of white roses. She holds them aloft, like a laurel wreath after a great conquest. 'For you,' she says, and shoves them into my hands.

The discomfort of my walk with Ted has made me forget I had planned to visit Grace. I wanted to tell her of the joy of this day: that Elizabeth has invited me, with Father Murray, with her other friends, to dance at her wedding. But the prickle of the thorns, and the wetness of their stems, reminds me.

Clutching the roses, I dig in my jeans' pocket for some small change I always carry, but the old flower seller refuses to take them.

'It is your gift,' she insists.

'For what?' I ask, embarrassed.

A finger, arthritic with neglect, touches first a bloom, and then, briefly, my chest, just where the ache from Ted's nearness, the impossibility of his nearness, still pulses.

'For still hoping,' she says, 'when you could be hating.'

I want to howl out an answer; reject what she is saying. For I, I who can see into my heart, I am still so full of hate that hope is barely a seed watered by Elizabeth's friendship. In silence, I bury my nose in the fragrant blossoms and the smell reminds me of Agnes. Where is my Agnes now? I have neither seen her nor heard from her since I walked away from

the Chapel of St Jude, leaving her on the floor weeping over her dead lover.

'Go,' the old crone says. 'Go visit the angel of Grace.'

'I'll buy double tomorrow,' I promise gruffly, refusing to cry again.

'I'm going home today,' she says, and starts gathering her few remaining blossoms, emptying water from the pails.

'I've paid the last of my debts now, the young Master says.' She stops piling the buckets one into the other, and sighs happily into a future only she can see. 'And so today I'm going home.'

There's not much I can say to that except, 'Goodbye,'.

It'll be strange not seeing her here, guarding the gate into the parish grounds, every morning when I arrive for work. 'Travel safely,' I add, for I wonder how she will eat, and where she'll sleep on her journey. I hesitate, then ask, for she's so poor I can't imagine she'll be able to buy much once she reaches the rural areas. 'Do you have enough money for food? For a taxi?' I begin to dig in my pocket again, about to insist that she takes what I will barely miss.

'Sweet child,' she sighs, and this time she lays that healing touch on my hand. 'Sweet, sweet child. The young Master will help me, so you just worry about yourself. Go, now,' she says and pushes me towards the parish gates. 'Go!' She makes a shooing motion with her hands, and so I leave, taking her gift with me into the sacred garden where loved

ones are remembered. I lay the white roses at the foot of the angel guarding Grace's ashes and, on impulse, I kneel before its celestial face and, unbidden, the words begin to tumble out...Gentle Jesus, I begin to pray, meek and mild...

When I return to the office, Elizabeth is still radiant with excitement, and full of wedding talk.

'Sorry I was so long,' I say, not sure if I'm hoping she will notice the tear stains on my cheeks and the grass stains on my jeans. Perhaps if she asks about them, I will talk to her about my first walk on a beach.

'Not a problem,' she says. 'You'll never guess who phoned again!'

I do guess, of course, for there's only one person these days who puts that specific smile on Elizabeth's face. Carol Wiseman.

The woman has been relentless in her pursuit of a friendship with Elizabeth. In a marriage, can one escape the flaws tainting the other? Elizabeth thinks so, and I must trust her judgement. I look at her now, all brittle animation and fingers tapping restlessly as she waits to tell me her news. After her bitter experience with the woman's husband, I wonder, sometimes, at Elizabeth's need.

'I can't guess.' Then I add what she wants to hear. 'Tell me who called.'

'Carol Wiseman,' she announces. 'Carol called again. Oh, Cathy, that's every day she's phoned this week!'

'That's great,' I say, and try to mean it. 'What did she want?'

'Oh, this and that. Mainly to find out how the wedding plans are coming along.' A slight frown mars the smooth skin between her eyebrows. 'When I see her again I'm going to ask her what's best for the table seatings.'

Perhaps Sister Johanna and her lover the charity priest were right, all those years ago. Perhaps I am the Devil's Child, for a wave of envy swallows me up. Surely a woman such as Carol Wiseman has many friends? Does she have to usurp mine? Elizabeth is the only friend I have; the only one I want. And when she talks of this socialite, this Carol Wiseman, I hear what she's not saying, this sensitive soul who is my friend Elizabeth.

There's hurt, hiding in the simple statement she made, and anxiety. But most of all there's a deep fear of rejection. And, suddenly, as if I'm in her skin, I break out in a sweat, the hair on my arms rising as a breath of something dark and dangerous and oh-so-enticing sweeps past me and wraps itself around Elizabeth.

'Don't see her again,' I blurt out.

She's startled out of her distraction. 'Why on earth not?' she asks blankly.

And my fear for her is so great, so overwhelming I don't immediately realise I'm kneeling before her, clutching her hands tightly in mine, trying to chafe them, to warm them. Or is it my own hands I'm trying to warm? For, this close, Elizabeth's eyes seem calm, and coolly determined.

'Her husband,' I stutter, and even though Elizabeth never told what happened between them, I say, 'Think of what he did to you.'

She drags her hands free, and gives me a reproachful look. 'How can you judge Carol by her husband? As a Christian I hope I can do better than visit the sins of one person on another's head. Especially not a friend like Carol!'

Aaah, Elizabeth, I want to cry. Dear, sweet Elizabeth who sees no evil. What I can tell you about life! Don't you know, I want to say to her, don't you know that friends can betray you too?

But she is so hurt, so disappointed, I say nothing more. I get to my feet and walk back to my desk, all the earlier joy of this day a faded memory.

How can I tell her what waits for her? She'll be hurt. She'll be lost and lonely. A darkness has seeped through her guard, evading all of us who love her.

Even I, who of all of them have tasted betrayal, will be unable to save my friend from this sunless spirit that waits to rape her kind and loving soul. I'm familiar with the scent

of betrayal. Agnes made me breathe it, and live it, and I smell it again, resting heavy around Elizabeth.

I can't save her from this nameless dread. Nothing I can say will make her believe me. There are people, sometimes wearing the faces of angels, who cannot be trusted: unrepentant, they eagerly embrace evil, not caring whom they devour along the path to their perdition. And I'm afraid - so afraid - the next sacrifice demanded for the sins of this malicious, temporal world we live in will be Elizabeth. Pure, innocent Elizabeth.

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ELIZABETH

The Present

He's gone. Finally, Clyve has left to do his duty in The War. Driving Granny May back from the airport, Elizabeth is surprised she is not more afraid.

'Will you be alright without me?' Clyve asks for the tenth - no, the hundredth time - as they call his flight. Granny May, as unyielding as ever, sits next to her, watching the crowds of young men and women, most dressed in army green; some, like Clyve, in civilian clothes. All of them saying goodbye; a few weeping and clinging to their loved ones, as if some premonition is telling them there'll be no happy homecoming for their soldiers.

It's then the panic again threatens Elizabeth and, briefly, she clings to his hands. But, out of the corner of her eye, she sees Granny May staring at Clyve, her eyes dry. The old woman sits still and rigid, except for her fingers, twisting a cotton handkerchief into tight little knots. Her lack of emotion gives Elizabeth the determination to contain her fears.

'I'll be fine,' she says bravely.

And, in that moment, she means it. Although, over the past fortnight, there are times when the panic almost consumes her: it's the albino's fault.

'Go with Clyve,' Cathy urges. 'I can manage the office.'

There's a compulsion to Cathy's voice; a leitmotif of murky emotion hooking into the recesses of Elizabeth's soul, almost turning her into the cowering sinner she'd been after The Wiseman Incident. That's how she thinks of it now. The Wiseman Incident. But she's done her penance, and Carol Wiseman has shown her how she triumphed over the evil within, regaining the strength of her faith. And regaining the vision of a young Elizabeth, inspired and saved by the blinding light of a dew-dropped Christ, hanging high above the old school gates.

So, when Cathy speaks in that compelling way, her eyes burning with an intensity giving them a similarity to the strange glitter in the parish gardener's eyes, Elizabeth simply thinks of Carol Wiseman. Of the admiration in her face

as she spoke of how even Simon Wiseman respects her, Elizabeth Johnson: milkmaid no longer.

She calms herself by remembering how her God and her faith save her always, even when she doubts. 'I'm staying,' she says to the albino. 'Someone must care for Granny May.'

'I'll visit her everyday,' Cathy offers. 'So will Father Murray, and Ted.'

Elizabeth wants to laugh. The albino and the biker, visiting someone like Granny May? But she doesn't want to be churlish, so she merely smiles her thanks, and says, 'I'll do more good here, where I can pray for Clyve's safety.'

And she's content with her choice when Carol Wiseman promises they'll tend to her while Clyve is away.

Turning the flicker on, Elizabeth carefully changes lanes, glancing at Granny May. The old woman hasn't moved. She hasn't spoken a word since she reached up and placed her lips to Clyve's cheek, the fingers of one hand still knotted in her hankie, the other lingering on Clyve's arm as if she wanted to touch him forever.

'May G-God keep you safe,' she'd said. A chill had seeped into Elizabeth's bones, for the old woman sounded despairing, offering a prayer to a God who never answered.

Granny May has never once set foot in the chapel of St Jerome's in all the years Elizabeth has been in the city. Has

she forgotten how to pray? She must have committed a terrible sin, Elizabeth thinks, to have so little faith. Perhaps that's why Father Murray visits the old woman so often: to save her soul. To bring her back to Christ.

But she's an old woman, and one of so little faith must be afraid of dying. Elizabeth's fear of the old woman changes into pity. And, she decides, she'll use this time that Clyve is away to help guide Granny May back into the arms of the God who so blessed Elizabeth's life.

Taking a hand off the wheel, Elizabeth leans over and places it comfortingly on the old woman's arm. Feeling the dryness of age in the wrinkled skin, all the time imagining how pleased Father Murray will be, when her faith succeeds in saving a lost soul where he has failed.

'Our Clyve will be fine, Granny May,' she says bracingly. 'We'll light candles for him every day, and God will keep him safe. Trust me. He'll be safe.'

For a long while, long enough for Elizabeth to turn off the highway and enter the curving driveway of the Templeton mansion - Granny May is moving back in while Clyve is away - the old woman doesn't answer. Then, shifting in her seat, her hands twisting the handles of her purse, she says, 'You think God listens to the prayers of sinners?'

Elizabeth's joy soars. This, she thinks, this is why God tested her faith. Not so Clyve, deserting her to risk everything in a war that has nothing to do with him, could be

her saviour. Neither was it for her to suffer a penance. No, her faith endured so she can save Granny May, a sinner. Granny May, a daughter of privilege, a non-believer, while she - the daughter of drunken Sam Johnson - is a soldier of faith.

For too long, guilt ate at her faith; the vision of mingled flesh under a moonlit night drowning out the brighter image of a cross, silvered with dew, and hanging high above an old school gate. But it's this part of her that endures. The gift of true faith, which has become so much her essence she'd forgotten that the faith she'd found as a young girl, one long ago morning, allows her to do anything, and overcomes everything.

This understanding lets a peace flow into her. And, as she pulls the car into the driveway, hurrying round the bonnet to open the door for Granny May, it gives her the strength to help the old woman out. Then, for the first time, Elizabeth puts her arms around her in a brief, but comforting, hug.

It makes Elizabeth feel good, so good. She's certain she feels God's approval in the air, and in the wind that brushes their faces as she locks the car and says, 'God does answer our prayers, Granny May.'

As a low, bitter laugh escapes the old woman, she can't help wondering again what sins this sternly upright old woman committed. Well, she tells herself stoutly, judgement is mine, saith the Lord, and all I need to do is save her as I saved myself. And, trembling as the power of her belief surges

through her, she shuffles Granny May inside and asks her where her Bible is.

Elizabeth finds herself unable to tell Carol Wiseman of her crusade; of the excitement driving new life, and new faith, through her. It's Cathy she tells. Somehow it doesn't embarrass her to share these feelings with the albino, for she has come to realise - it makes her blush even to think of it! - that Cathy worships her. And it feels good; to bask in Cathy's covert glances of reverence.

She's become aware of them, since Carol Wiseman showed her that she's worthy of so much more than she's settled for these past years she lived so laden with sin. So she rewards the albino, giving her small tasks to do. Letting her make Father Murray's coffee. Other, personal jobs: like taking the proofs of the wedding invitations back to the printers; or getting her to type out the provisional guest list. Elizabeth needs it typed to show Carol Wiseman when she goes to dinner. 'Just the two of us,' Carol promised. 'Simon will be away on business.'

The offer thrills Elizabeth. And Cathy, in her gruff way, is pleased too. For Elizabeth, in a rush of happiness, having placed the albino's name right next to Father Murray's on the guest list, shows her where her name is.

'What can I do to help?' Cathy keeps on asking her, after she first saw the list.

'There's a book in the parish library,' Elizabeth says, 'called "Christ is for Sinners". Fetch that for me.' She'd read it herself, a few years after The Wiseman Incident. It hadn't made much sense to her then. Now, knowing the years she'd run from Wiseman, in fear of her demon's power over her, were years in which she'd used her faith as a shield: now the book takes on a whole new meaning. One she determines to share with Granny May.

'I'm going to read it to Granny May,' she says, when Cathy returns and places it on her desk.

Cathy's eyebrows lift in surprise. 'From what you've said about her, I didn't think Clyve's grandmother would read it.'

And so Elizabeth tells her.

'I'm going to save her,' she bursts out. 'She's never been to church as long as I've been in the city.'

'Maybe she has her reasons for not going to chapel,' Cathy answers warily. 'Maybe God has failed her.'

'Or she failed God! I'm sure there's some terrible sin in her background. That's why she keeps everyone at a distance,' Elizabeth replies, surprised at the look the albino slants in her direction. Those strange eyes, always red-rimmed from their sensitivity to light, take on an intensity that almost disconcerts Elizabeth, until she realises that, despite her

efforts, she's still not quite at ease with the albino's difference to normal people.

'Does it matter?' Cathy asks solemnly.

'That Granny May has sinned?' Elizabeth remembers where Cathy has come from. 'Oh no, dear,' she says and, not wanting to be unkind, steels herself to jump up and give the albino a hug. 'Jesus forgives all sinners, so one's past doesn't matter.'

'The way I heard it, we shouldn't sin at all.'

'We sin; that's why we're human.'

'You haven't sinned,' Cathy says, shocked, as the possibility enters her mind. 'Have you?'

Elizabeth laughs at the albino's shocked grimace. Not wanting to lose Cathy's admiration, she answers, 'Just a little sin here and there,' and, as she speaks, she realises how right her words are.

Her 'sin', The Wiseman Incident, is not such a sin after all. It's not murder, or some terrible crime against humanity. It's a mere human foible. Christ came, and suffered, to free sinners, to save them by the grace of God. Just like the book, the one she had Cathy fetch from the parish library, promised. And the last of the chains built of guilt disintegrate as Elizabeth throws her head back, laughing joyously at the lightness of freedom. Freedom from the consequences of one small deed that surely never hurt anyone, not even herself. For the pain she's suffered these past nine years, waiting for

Clyve to marry her, has been nothing more than repentance for a sin that wasn't a sin.

'I'm free from sin,' she says, finally believing it.
'Because of Jesus. And so are you.'

'Am I?' Cathy asks, her tone quiet with the same despair Elizabeth heard in Granny May's voice.

Poor lost soul, Elizabeth thinks, remembering that Father Murray told her Cathy's crime involved a dead nun. Pity, born out of her righteousness, now that she's saved, floods her. Overflowing with the power of her faith, Elizabeth finally finds the strength to give Cathy that hug. She's touched by the sudden tension in the body in her arms, and hugs Cathy tighter until she's rewarded with an awkward hug in return.

Beaming her approval, she steps back. 'Of course you are,' she says. 'No-one here at St Jerome cares about the rest of your life. It's what you are now that matters.'

'Maybe,' Cathy says, and stares out the window, into the garden where Ted is busy digging a hole to plant a new tree someone has donated to the Parish.

A cedar tree, he tells Elizabeth, crushing a leaf between his long, elegant fingers, when she asks earlier. He raises the leaf to his nose, inhaling the fragrance deeply, and then holds it out to her. She frowns, uncomfortable with his familiarity, and with his eyes. Soft liquid pools, they invite her to dive deep. For a moment she's tempted, thinking she sees a shadow of a girl in them. But then she grasps for her

control, the control she'd only ever lost once before on a balcony, tempted by her demon, tempted by Simon Wiseman. But she learned from that lapse. Now she steps back, away from Ted, jerking her head out of his reach and so, again, her will endures. When she looks back at him, she sees nothing but a pair of sea grey eyes, watching her with a rude intensity. She turns her back and walks away.

The days Clyve is gone go quickly, until its Friday again. Elizabeth expects Carol to arrive soon; she's picking Elizabeth up on her way home for what's become their weekly dinner at the Wiseman mansion. Elizabeth paces back to the window of the parish office, peering out, willing Carol to come. She's wearing a new dress, by a designer Carol recommended, and she can hardly wait until Carol sees her in it.

They meet for some lunch-time shopping in an inconspicuous little boutique, tucked away in an arcade. Only a discreet notice on the solid wood door proclaims that there's more than a passage beyond it. Elizabeth hesitates; but Carol walks boldly through it. An assistant appears from nowhere. Assessing Elizabeth's body with one glance, she leads them to a rail bustling with a variety of colours and fabrics.

'Clyve will like this on you,' Carol says, as Elizabeth tries on dress after dress.

The hallowed atmosphere of the small room is fragrant with the heavy cloying scent of tuberoses tumbling from a tall crystal vase. Combined with the solemnity of the shop assistant as she produces dress after dress for Carol's inspection, it makes Elizabeth too awkward to point out there are no prices on any of the items displayed. She shivers at the size of the steadily growing pile of gowns put aside at Carol's nod.

'How am I going to pay?' Elizabeth whispers.

'Darling,' Carol exclaims, 'this is for your wedding trousseau.' An imperious flick of a wrist adds another frock. 'Clyve won't object. Will he?'

Elizabeth swallows her doubts. Carol, born into the same privileged world as Clyve, would surely be aware of what's expected of someone about to become a Templeton wife. Still, a remembered whisper of Cathy's words make her think that Clyve isn't due back for weeks, and he left her money, but not enough to pay for all of this.

'But..., ' she stammers.

'Oh, darling!' Carol languidly lights a cigarette. 'Felicite won't mind. She'll open an account for you. I've been a customer for years and I'll stand surety until your Clyve comes back.' And, as if Elizabeth's concerns are absurd, she laughs, a rich dark sound filling the room with a vitality

that shivers down Elizabeth's spine, coaxing her into nodding her agreement. Soon, Carol selects a wardrobe of new clothes for Elizabeth, making her look exactly like Elizabeth Templeton and nothing like Elizabeth Johnson at all.

There's a pink linen tunic she, at first, objects to until Carol and the shop assistant embarrass her with a mutual irritation at her gaucheness. Carol stands up from the armchair - a sleek, twisted design Elizabeth privately thinks is ugly - and, with firm hands, turns Elizabeth to face the mirror.

'Pink is your colour,' she says. 'It's soft, and gentle, and sweet. Just like you. And,' she adds, her fingers skimming up to play in Elizabeth's hair, removing the hairpins so it falls in a straight golden curtain to her shoulders, framing her flushed cheeks and bright eyes, 'you look like an angel. A sexy, golden angel.' And she laughs that bewitching laugh again.

'I'm not sexy,' Elizabeth mumbles, flushed with more than embarrassment now, flushed with a volatile cocktail of emotions raised by Carol's fingers in her hair, and on her body.

'You are. You just don't know your own strengths,' Carol says, smiling in such a way Elizabeth's heart thumps with surprise and a secret vanity forbidden to angels and women. 'Simon says you're beautiful, and he's never wrong about a woman.' Carol holds her gaze and slowly, idly, strokes a

crimson-tipped finger over Elizabeth's breast so casually she almost doesn't react. All that exists in the moment is the path Carol's finger burns across her flesh. Anticipation - or terror, she can't tell - suspends her breath. When she thinks of pulling away, that finger, long and elegant, reminding Elizabeth of other, more masculine, fingers crushing the leaf of a cedar tree, that finger of temptation moves to tap Carol's pursed lips as she says reflectively, 'Clyve will be hungry for you when he comes back, except...'

'Except what?' Elizabeth asks, remembering her failed attempt at seducing her fiancé, the night he told her he was leaving to go to The War.

'You need a better bra. French. Lace, with a tiny satin bow, just here.' She presses an impartial finger between Elizabeth's breasts and Elizabeth's flush deepens as she realises the other woman had merely been feeling her bra. It's her own callowness which misunderstands the casual physical touching between women such as Carol Wiseman and her friends.

'Do I?' She gasps a silent prayer of thanks that she hadn't reacted to the novelty of another woman's touch on her body. There's still so much for her to learn, she cautions herself, before she'll be Carol's friend.

And because her God, in His goodness, in His compassion, has given her a second chance, this time she'll make sure that nothing will stop her life from being perfect in every way.

And Carol Wiseman is the one who can show her how to be a proper, a perfect, Templeton wife.

She's wearing one of those bras today. Skimpy, and vaguely uncomfortable, it plumps her breasts up so the neckline of her dress - also new - seems somehow less demure than it did on the hanger. Still, she can hardly wait to hear what Carol says when she arrives.

'I thought you didn't like pink,' Cathy says, when she arrives at the parish office.

'I didn't,' she replies, 'but I do now. Carol says it's a good colour on me.' A sudden uncertainty grips her. 'Why? Don't you think it suits me?'

There's a moment's hesitation. 'You look good,' Cathy says, then adds in her forthright way, 'but you were fine before. More real, without all the makeup.'

Elizabeth wants to take offence. But some undertone in Cathy's manner, some tension around her mouth, tells her this: Cathy is jealous of the friendship she has with Carol.

Elizabeth can't help it. Her lips tip up in a small, satisfied smile. She feels for Cathy's pain, she does. What must life be like for someone as afflicted as Cathy? She, who has suffered too, can only regret that Cathy has no friends of her own. But still, there's a rapture growing inside her.

She's come so far in her faith that she's a beacon of shining hope to such sad creatures as the albino.

And, because she'll never forget what it feels like to be a victim, because she made a promise she'll always be kind to others, Elizabeth kills her smile and walks to stand next to Cathy.

Cathy, hunched over the old, lumpy computer, has turned away from Elizabeth's silence, diligently typing out the wedding guest list. She starts as Elizabeth touches her gently on the shoulder, whispering a curse not quite softly enough for Elizabeth to ignore.

'Don't curse,' she says, 'it's not Christian.' Then, meaning it, for she doesn't want anyone - not even the albino - to be as alone and friendless as she once was, before she found her God, she adds, 'Carol isn't my only friend.'

Cathy swivels in her chair, searching for reassurance. She must have found it in Elizabeth's face for, with hardly any hesitation, she briefly covers Elizabeth's hand with her own.

'Thanks,' she says gruffly, and turns back to her typing, but not before Elizabeth pities the sheen of the tears Cathy can't hide.

Before she can say more, there's a murmur of approaching voices and Ted, dirty from his gardening, ushers in an immaculately dressed Carol Wiseman. Her sophisticated ennui as she peers round the comfortable parish office, Elizabeth's

haven for so many years, lights a flicker of the old shame in Elizabeth.

'So this is where you work,' Carol drawls, her indolent surveillance of the room broken only when her gaze falls on Cathy who, sensing her appraisal pauses in the middle of her typing and stares aggressively back.

An acrid smell tickles Elizabeth's nostrils, reminding her of the hot water springs Clyve once took her to; it must come from Ted, she decides, some poisonous sulphuric insecticide he uses in the parish garden.

'You can go now, Ted,' she says. 'You're not needed here.'

'Are you sure?' he asks. And, before his eyes confuse her, she looks away from him, towards a bored Carol, watching Ted with a slight challenge colouring her face not as attractive as Elizabeth had always thought it.

'Yes,' she says. 'You can go.'

He inclines his head and holds Cathy's gaze until she sighs loudly, heavily, and gets up to walk towards him. Politely, he holds the door open for her, but she stops in the doorway and turns towards Carol.

'Elizabeth's my friend,' she snarls. 'Don't hurt her.' Then she's gone, as Ted spreads his long, elegant hands across her back and abruptly pushes her through the door, slamming it behind them and all that remains of them is the fading echo of their voices as they begin to argue.

'What was that about?' Carol says, her lips pinching inwards in silent affront.

'She works here.' Elizabeth, touched by Cathy's concern, is also upset by Carol's annoyance. 'Cathy's a bit rough,' she apologises, 'but she means well.' Elizabeth hesitates, then explains. 'She's been in prison.' Then she relaxes with a shrill giggle as Carol starts laughing.

'Oh my God,' she says to Elizabeth. 'For a moment there I thought I'd come to a mad house!' and her face is once again that of the Carol who is Elizabeth's good friend.

Breaking out in a relieved smile, Elizabeth says, 'Forgive her. She's not so bad once you're used to her.'

'Well,' Carol says, 'I hope she's not coming to your wedding. That ugliness! The common viciousness! My God! It'll have your guests running from the church before Clyve can say "I do"!'.

'Oh,' Elizabeth says, thinking of the guest list Cathy herself is busy typing up, the one with Cathy's name right next to Father Murray's. 'I haven't decided yet.' Before Carol can frame any more awkward questions, she asks, 'Where are we going tonight?'

'Back to my house,' Carol says. 'I want to spend some time alone with you. Some girl time,' she adds. 'Before you become a newly married woman, with Clyve demanding all of your time.'

And her smile is so dizzying, so relaxed after the tension with Cathy, Elizabeth returns it with one of her own, saying, 'Shall we go?' and not keeping the excitement out of her voice.

For every time she's with Carol, she learns. And she comes closer to turning her dream of marrying Clyve into a permanent reality. A reality that will forever blot away the past, making her as perfect and as pure as the remembered vision of the morning sun reflecting off the glowing, bedewed face of her first, her only, Saviour.

* * *

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MAY

The Past, fifty years ago, October to December

After Enoch goes to Grace the night of the Hunt Ball, I turn more and more to Harry. I revel in his eager surprise, although I hate him for it too. It's Mayflower he loves each night, just as my Daddy loved her; it can never be me. But what else do I have to offer, except the remnants of an evil that destroys all in its path?

Sometimes I pity my young son. What chance does he have for a happy life when his father loves that bitch, that whore Mayflower, who lost her only hope of redemption when Enoch turned and walked away? I am only May now and I, too, am lost.

My poor little boy. My poor little Harry plays on, crawling on chubby legs amongst the rose garden. It's less immaculate now, for I have lost interest in it. The bushes have started to grow wild, thorns and blooms overlapping one

another, spilling over the path. Only one as young and unaware of the dangers as my son Harry is can move about freely, enjoying their fragrance. I stand watching him, my back to the wildly churning ocean. The damp wind rolls off the waves, blowing my hair around my face, powering invisible arms of thorns and roses that touch briefly at Harry's tender skin. He screams with excitement each time he innocently dodges their capricious clutches but, inevitably, they capture and tear his tender youthful flesh. God, oh God, there's blood, so red against the white innocent baby flesh. I can't stand knowing he is doomed as I am doomed, as we all are doomed, by our very humanity, to succumb to the evil within us. The secrets of life eat away at the foundations of our souls and even their weight cannot keep them drowned forever. For always, always, the monsters must rise from the ocean depths and drag us back down. Lost, and painfully aware that the glimpses we have of love, transcendental love, Divine Love, are reserved only for the privileged few. Like Grace, Saint Grace.

I stoop and grab my son, clutching him to my chest as I run through the garden, his wails of pain ebbing into whimpers. Grace waits at the top of the stairs, serene and a bit frail, shadowed by that stranger I no longer speak to.

'Take him,' I say, pushing the child at her, even though he clings and cries for me. 'Take him!'

'But...he wants you, dear,' she says, cradling a hand protectively around his head, the blue veins of old age

showing through the wrinkles and reflecting the blueness of the veins of extreme youth shining beneath the pale fluff covering my son's head.

'I can't help him,' I snarl. Her eyes flood with pain, etching the wrinkles deeper and her face smaller and somehow defenceless. 'I can never help him,' I say, and I hope neither of them can hear the despair flickering beneath the surface of my words.

'Oh, May, dear,' she says, but she looks at him, not me, at him and, although I refuse to acknowledge his presence in any way, I can't help squinting in his direction.

He is watching me and I hate the expression on his face. What wretchedness does he bear? It is I whom he has deprived of all hope. It is I who offered him my love, all of Mayflower's love, and he turned his back on me and gave all he had to Grace.

'What?' I say to her, ignoring him.

'He's just a little child,' she says, 'but he's too heavy for me these days. You must carry him now. Take him back, dear, take him back.'

'No,' I say and turn away, away from more than just my son. I turn from Grace and her young lover; I turn away from the promise of paradise he so falsely offered me when he held me in his arms the day I should have died at the hands of the rebel soldiers.

'It was too soon,' I hear him say, 'for her to understand the love we share, Grace. She wasn't ready yet.'

'Poor May,' she replies, so softly I almost miss her words as I walk into the cool darkness of the Templeton mansion, no longer Grace's mansion, but mine. 'Poor little Mayflower.'

And all the strength, all the power, May has rises and focuses on that old woman who is all I can never be, because first I was Mayflower before I became May.

My son is asleep in bed, his wounds patched but far from healed, when his father comes home that night.

'Reubens sold today!' Harry says, putting a hand on my shoulder and rubbing a finger along the hollow exposed by the crew neck of my jersey. 'That's the last of them, May dear. The last! All the pharmacies in town are Templeton pharmacies now, love, just like you said they'd be!' Gleeefully, he presses his fingers deeper, wanting my praise.

'Good,' I say. 'Good.'

This is all that counts I remind myself. Hard ambition and hard wealth. Things one can count on, and touch, like a hard trigger on a hard, cold gun.

Harry hesitates, then with one last rub, removes his fingers from my neck as he adds, 'I was a bit...uh, when the old man brought the papers, he was weeping. He just kept on

crying.' Uncertain of my mood, not wanting to jeopardise the nightly feast he's been enjoying after all the years of famine in our bedroom, he tries to gauge my reaction. 'We own all the others. Maybe we should have let him keep one of the pharmacies.' He sighs, rubbing his forefinger over his closed eyes. 'So it wasn't such a loss in his life.'

'He'll get over his disappointment,' I say. 'We all do.'

This time I'm wrong. Three weeks later, the old man shoots himself. He dies instantly and Harry, after he hears, never visits Mayflower again. And, through the long restless nights that follow, I tell myself I am glad that Harry no longer calls to Mayflower, for now I can be May. Only May: strong and safe and powerful.

With the new pharmacies to manage, Harry spends less and less time at home. Sometimes he even works through the night: or so he says. I don't question him. All that matters is that the pharmacies prosper rapidly. Slowly, my beautiful mahogany cupboard, then later, the whole mansion, begins to overflow with what I can touch and smell and see. And I tell myself I am happy.

With his father so busy at the pharmacies he will inherit one day, and me busy running my charities and my home, little

Harry spends more and more time with his grandmother. Somehow, those wide grey eyes of his retain their innocence. I can no longer bring myself to hug him when he crawls out to greet me as I arrive to fetch him, his small face crinkled with determination as he struggles down the small step leading off Grace's porch. What's the use of teaching him love? Let him find out now, while he's still young enough to grow defences, that love, no matter what the source, is a lie. Still, he doesn't stop smiling.

'He's a little angel,' Grace says, and bends to whisper some words of praise in his ear as, not touching his skull, she strokes a hand above his head. Polishing his halo, I jeer to myself, for Grace has always been one to have visions of halos and angels and, once, even Jesus in her dreams.

I sigh. It's been a while since she had those delusions. 'Have you been mixing up your digitalis dose again, Grace?' I ask.

'Oh, no, dear,' she smiles. 'Enoch worries about that for me now.'

I never saw him come out behind Grace, but then I deliberately don't notice him since that ghastly episode on the balcony the evening of the Hunt Ball.

'It's the least I can do, Mrs T,' he says, in that voice, as rich with nuance as his damned eyes. Those damned eyes, which can still make Mayflower weep if I look too closely at

them. So I ignore him, as if he's not there, as he adds, 'While we're still together.'

'The time is close now? For you to go?' she asks, a little wistful but, surprising considering the devotion they've shared since his arrival, no different from the times she's said good-bye to her other protégées.

'Close enough,' he says, and touches her cheek so gently her eyes drift closed with the pleasure of it.

'I must get little Harry home,' I say harshly.

'Don't go. You hardly visit any more.' Grace pleads. I never visited much before the stranger came, so I'm not sure why she's complaining now. 'Stay, so we can talk a while.'

Talk? I must sit and listen to her rambling on about angels when I don't even believe in a god? Talk? When he's sitting there next to her, with his black hair and black heart and his beautiful eyes that can steal my soul if he wants it? But he doesn't want it. He only wants Grace.

'I must go to the clinic,' I say politely, picking up my son in one arm and, with the other, his bundles of bags, crammed with clean nappies and milk bottles and all the other essentials a baby needs.

'You're going to visit your uncle again?'

I nod, balancing myself carefully so I don't drop my load, and bend to place the obligatory kiss on her cheek.

'What a good daughter you are,' she says. Then, as I scowl at her, startled into momentary stillness, she turns to

the man at her side, adding, 'Don't I have a good daughter, Enoch?'

'You do, Mrs T,' he agrees, but he's talking to me. Those eyes look at me, and through me, and in me, as he adds in a murmur as sweet as the wind whispering over a still deep ocean, as he smiles at me and says, 'She's a good daughter. A loving daughter.'

I can't bear it. I simply cannot bear his praise, for in it I hear a love so deep it almost makes me believe again. Believe that love is possible, even for one such as I, for one such as Mayflower. Certainly, his words touch Mayflower, for she shifts and groans within me. I instinctively deny her, deny him, and little Harry yelps in surprise as my arm tightens about his warm body and my angry No! becomes a strangled gargle trapped in my throat.

'Bless you, dear,' Grace says. 'I hope you're not getting the influenza.' She reaches up, lightly brushing my forehead, testing for the clamminess of illness, as if I were no older than the child I hold in my arms. As if I were as dearly beloved.

I have to escape. I have to get away.

'I'm going to be late,' I say, and turn my back on them, almost stumbling in my haste to reach the new car. Harry bought it with the first of the profits from the new pharmacies. A Silver Wraith, it's called, and as it glides

along the road it glints like the sea on an overcast day, or like the eyes of a stranger when he burrows into your soul.

We hired a new man to replace old Elijah. As I hurry along the path, away from Grace and her lover, he holds the door open for me, politely tipping his cap and reaching for the baby bags. I give them to him and fling myself into the car.

I hold little Harry tightly, not looking back at them, but burying my face in his baby soft hair. He chortles with delight and curiously touches the wetness on my cheeks with his baby fingers. An echo of his words reverberates inside my head. A loving daughter...a loving daughter...and all I can think of is how much love hurts. It hurts so much my heart no longer knows how to love. Or even whether it still wants to.

'How did the visit to the clinic go?' Grace asks next time I visit her.

She's propped up in bed, pale and tired, violet shadows dusted under her eyes. Leaning back into the softness of the pillows banked behind her head, she scrabbles on the bedside table, disturbing the items scattered across its surface - a few mints, a book, a pen, some notelets, all that keeps an invalid busy. Her movements, stiff with tiredness, knock over a small bottle of pills and it clatters noisily to the floor as she clicks her tongue in annoyance.

I sigh. 'What do you want?'

'Some water.'

Rising from my chair I fill an empty glass with water from the jug, half pushed behind the bedside lamp. 'Here,' I say, holding the glass to her dry and slightly cracked lips. 'You're dehydrating. You need to drink more.' I lift her hand from where it lies on the coverlet, limp and exhausted, and press it against the glass.

'Dear May,' she says, gulping some liquid down, before sinking into a quiet rest, the glass loosely clasped on her chest. She breathes shallowly, quietly, for a while, then rouses herself again. 'How did the visit to the clinic go?' she asks again.

'Satisfactory,' I reply shortly.

'Is your father in good health?' she asks.

'My uncle,' I bite out. 'I go to visit my uncle.'

She lifts her eyelids, thin and papery with age and illness, and gazes at me with dreaming eyes. 'Sorry, dear,' she says. 'I'm confused so easily these days. I meant your uncle. Is he well?'

The blood does not still its headlong tumble through my body. Does she suspect the truth? Somehow, from the small knowing curve of her lips I think she does.

'My uncle,' I place a subtle stress on the word, 'hasn't spoken a word in over twenty years, Grace.' I shrug. 'He's as well as expected.'

'He must be so sad,' she says, her eyes drifting closed again. 'Sad.'

As fast as the fear that she knows more than I have ever told drove my blood into a frenzy, the anger congeals it so it runs thick and heavy through my heart. What about my sadness? I want to rage. What about Mayflower?

The attics of the mind hold onto their dusty secrets, freeing them only at inappropriate moments, and I hear my Daddy's voice, so full of sorrow, say to me as he sometimes did, 'You're so beautiful, Mayflower. So beautiful. A poor, weak man like me can't resist you.' He'd cry, then, as much as Mayflower did, all the way through his loving. Both of us crying: sad for Mayflower's hurting. And sad for him, for what mere mortal can resist the lure of Mayflower's temptation?

'Where's Enoch?' I ask, thinking of one man who could, and did, resist Mayflower.

'He's busy getting everything ready for his journey, dear,' Grace answers.

Mayflower lurches upwards as she hears what Grace says. The stranger is leaving. Enoch, the beautiful stranger is leaving. And in that lonely epiphany I finally admit that, no matter how much I ignored him, Mayflower and I still long to have him love us.

'When?' I blurt.

'Soon,' she sighs. There is no hint on her face of the pain she must face at the incipient loss of her lover. There

is only a deep, abiding love. 'It'll begin soon.' Her smile deepens into one of serenity, of innocence. It's a smile much like the one on my Daddy's face as he lies in his bed at the clinic, with only a scar on his temple to remind me of what he once was: lover to Mayflower, demiurge of May and father to both.

'So Enoch will be gone soon. Good,' I say, and grit my teeth to stop Mayflower's keening cry as she sees the end of her hopes for love. The veils around her begin to disintegrate. She creeps out and I feel the skeletal fingers of her evil clutch my fragmenting control, pulling and dragging it so it rips enough for her to escape, enough for her to pour out into the room. Her presence hovers over us, startling Grace so she frowns at me with urgent, worried eyes.

'What is it, May dear?' she asks. 'Oh, what is it that makes you look so-'

I interrupt her. 'He must leave then. Good riddance! He's a liar. A philandering thief. He must go and never come back,' and the sobs are loud in the room, quiet now with the scent of death.

'May! Not Enoch!' Grace says. 'Oh, no, dear, never Enoch. You don't understand!'

My chair crashes backwards as I jump to my feet, shaking, shivering with anger. 'It's you who doesn't understand.' And I step forward so I can lean over her. 'He promised me. He promised me love. But he hurt me. He hurt me.' I'm not sure if

I'm talking about my Daddy, or Enoch, the tall stranger whose eyes promised hope, but delivered only despair.

The tears are running down Grace's cheeks and she sits half-upright, reaching out a trembling hand to me. 'You can only find it in yourself,' she cries. 'Oh Mayflower, dear child, you don't understand! Before he can love you, you must first find it in yourself!'

'I understand this,' I say, and grip her hand, 'that you have left nothing for me.' I shake her hard, until she coughs a bit. 'You took all their love,' I cry, thinking of the people clustering around her, tenderly calling her Mrs T, and I shake her again, crying, 'You had all of them loving you! Why couldn't you let him love me?'

'May,' she gasps. 'Mayflower. He loves you. He does. He does.'

'No!' I scream. I shake her like a rag doll. She's so frail she feels like air between my hands. 'You lie. He turned away from me. He turned away from me.' I'm crying in noisy gulps and hardly hear what she replies.

'Only because you weren't ready. You weren't ready for him yet.' Her gasps become choking gulps that penetrate my rage. I reach deep and find some of May's cool, calm strength. Loosening my hands, I drop her back on her cushions, stepping away, my foot bumping against the small vial of pills that had rolled off her table.

Her hands flutter. First, to her chest, then to her face, where a faint blue tinges her lips. Then back to her chest as a grimace of pain crosses her face. 'My pills,' she pants. 'My heart pills.'

I stare down at the floor, to the bottle marked Purgoxin, lying next to my shoe. I look at it a long while, thinking of how hard May has tried. How many years she's struggled to be loved. And always this woman, this Grace, has stood before me, drawing away the light that could have saved Mayflower from her own evil. Without that light I'm doomed already, I brood, and if she's gone, if I do not bend and pick up the tablets, May can be the Mrs T everyone - including Enoch - loves.

I close my eyes and let the multitude of my senses sweep over me. There, in the distance, I see the memory of Grace choking and coughing. Faintly, I smell the dusty road where a young rebel, greedy for all that is not his, holds aloft my pearls. All of this, all of it, drowns in the sound of someone crying. Great, roaring sobs cleaving through the ocean of my heart. It is Mayflower. Mayflower is lamenting for an old dying woman, who once touched her cheek gently, offering her a love she couldn't recognise, and didn't know she wanted.

I drop to my knees, my fingers scrabbling for the pills. 'Come on, come on!' I hear Mayflower urge me, but my hand is shaking so much, and I'm crying so much, I drop the bottle again. Eventually I grasp it.

I shake a pill into my hand, crawling to the side of the bed. I open Grace's mouth and put the pill in, holding up the water to her lips. 'Drink, Grace, please, please drink,' I beg. 'The pills will help.'

But the water dribbles out of the slack corners of her mouth, and I am too late. Too late to save Grace.

And far too late to ever save myself.

* * *

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CATHY

The Present

I see less of Elizabeth, since Clyve has gone to war. She begins most days with Carol Wiseman; more often than not she ends them with the woman too, driving to her house after visiting Granny May.

Every morning, though, I arrive at the parish early. Elizabeth has given me the keys so I don't have to wait for her to open. On the mornings the rain shrouds the old city in greyness, I'm grateful for her trust. And, because she still occasionally comes in early enough to tell me about her life, I always put the coffee on to percolate and lay out her work for her, so we can have extra, precious, minutes together before starting the day's work.

'The printer delivered the final wedding invitations yesterday evening,' she says. 'Wait until you see them! They're exactly what I wanted.'

'I'll help you write them out,' I say, 'and deliver them.'

'You're so sweet, Cathy,' she replies. 'But Carol's already offered to help. I'm sorry.'

'That's okay.' I shrug, trying not to hurt. It's enough, I tell myself, to share her wedding day with my friend. It's not her fault I'm so alone.

It's a loneliness that even makes me grateful when Ted starts arriving early at the parish. I'll busy myself with the daily routine of waking the parish office - checking the answering machine, opening the mail - and he'll reach into his leather jacket, pulling out a tightly rolled up newspaper, smoothing it out with those long, artistic fingers. Then he'll sit at Elizabeth's desk, scribbling copious notes in a notebook as he reads all the daily news from births and obituaries to the death toll of all the wars being fought in various corners of the world.

We never say much. And we never talk about that day on the beach. Yet, I'm comforted by his presence.

Since the day Carol Wiseman invaded the parish with her urbane boredom, I've wondered what there was between her and Ted. Where had they met before? He'd scared her; made her anxious until Elizabeth banished him from the office. Before I

could find out more, his eyes had compelled me to follow him, when all I'd wanted to do was protect Elizabeth.

'I want to stay,' I'd said, even as he pushed me out the door, closing it and shutting me off from her.

'You can't,' Ted had answered. 'Father Murray needs you.'

'Elizabeth needs me. She's not safe with that woman.'

'Elizabeth is as safe as she wants to be,' he'd said, and her laughter had drifted over us. How could I argue then? But I wondered. About what he knew about Elizabeth and her friend Carol Wiseman. And about him.

He's sitting slumped over the desk, busily filling pages of his notebook with a thin, spidery handwriting. Now and then he stops. Flipping through the pages of his newspaper, he searches out information, then bends his head again and writes furiously. Sometimes, he frowns heavily as he writes, pushing the pencil deeply into the pad, as if exorcising some cryptic fury. At other times, he nods and chuckles, sounding more like Father Murray than himself.

Curiosity eventually drives me to ask. I pour him a cup of coffee and casually stroll across to where he sits. Placing the cup at his elbow, I say, 'What are you doing?'

'Recording history,' he replies.

The answer is so unexpected, I bark out a laugh before I can stop myself. He laughs with me, as he did before, the day I first met him, there in front of the wooden cross above the altar of St Jerome.

'It's funny?' he asks. 'That I record history?'

'You don't look the type who'd have an interest in history.'

He stays silent, but his smile lingers and his eyes fill with a challenge that echo my words back at me. 'I mean-'

'It's easy, isn't it?'

'What is?' I ask sullenly, but I concede what I've done and I can't undo it now. I've shown that I see only the leather and the tattoos. The biker, not the soul. How often have I complained that people judge me only by my ugly, colourless skin and don't see that my difference to them is only outward?

He stares at me steadily over the rim of his coffee cup, until I blurt, 'Okay! I'm sorry.'

'It's best,' he says, 'to look with your inner eye. Let your heart's voice speak. That's where you'll find the truth.'

He replaces his cup on the tabletop, then dips his head and begins writing again, leaving me angry and ashamed. He's shown me a side of myself that makes me doubt the pain I've suffered all my life. Was it real? It's easy to deceive myself when the lie makes it comfortable for me to blame others for the pain of my memories.

I cough to clear the obstruction in my throat. 'So,' I ask, 'what history do you like? Biographies? Political? Wars?'

'All,' he replies, 'because they're intertwined. Politics and wars are only a result of man's personal history. Let man

change his own life, and mankind will have a different history.'

'It's not so easy to change your life,' I say, brooding on the malicious god who stripped me of normality even in my mother's womb. How could I change that even if, impossibly, it could mean the end of another war?

'It's worth a try, isn't it?' Ted asks me. 'To learn to listen with the heart; to find the truth and know what love is.'

I nod, my lips held tight against the protests I want to make. If sweet Agnes couldn't love me, who could? Perhaps Elizabeth, smiling at me as she tells me I'm invited to her wedding. Touching my shoulder as she tells me Carol Wiseman isn't her only friend. Carol Wiseman. The name heralds in the scent of danger newly surrounding Elizabeth.

'I'm worried about Elizabeth,' I say to Ted.

'Don't be,' he answers without lifting his head. 'She'll write her own history. As we all do.'

I clench my teeth against the angry words, but they escape anyway. 'I didn't write my history.' I pinch a piece of skin on my arm and jerk it fiercely. 'I didn't choose this. I was born with it! Do you think any sane person would choose to suffer this if we could all write our own lives?'

'It's your saving grace,' he says, still writing in that damned notebook until I want to snatch it away, forcing him to

look at me, really look at me and what I have suffered. Living my life empty of love and empty of hope, until Elizabeth.

'It's my cross,' I shout. 'It's all that people ever see.' Before my rage breaks the banks of my control, I run from the office. But he still captures me, even as I flee.

'Cross or grace, Catherine, you make the choice of which it'll be,' he calls softly after me. 'Remember how easy it is to only see with the eyes.'

I want to hate him. As I pause for breath in the nave of the chapel, I want so badly to hate him for reminding me that I, too, have judged him only by his difference.

And I'm drawn to remember the time when I believed Agnes loved me. When I felt loved even as I loved. There'd been peace around me then. The orphanage girls had stopped punishing me, and I'd stopped hating them. All that hate and punishment in the name of difference. And yet, during the time of Agnes's love, my difference hadn't mattered.

Cushioned by love, I'd let the arrows of their hatred fall dead to the ground. I'd not bent to pick them up, to re-poison them with my own hatred and send them shooting back and forth, back and forth. No, I'd smiled and smiled in love, until they'd started smiling back at me. Until my friend Agnes had betrayed me. And I'd started to hate again.

But how can I hate now when an undercurrent, dense and redolent with love, envelopes me from all sides? I'm consumed by it. There is no way to escape it but to stumble to the

altar, prostrating myself on the cold stone floor, until my panic becomes peace and I can remember my hate, but not feel it.

'Have you hurt yourself, Cathy?' Elizabeth speaks over me. I open my eyes, clashing directly with her green gaze. There's concern there, touched with an emptiness that wasn't there before Clyve went to war.

'I'm fine,' I say, feeling foolish. 'I'm admiring the colours.' I lift an arm and point up to the triforium gallery, with its stained glass arches lit by the early morning sun. 'They're beautiful,' I sigh. 'I've never noticed before.' And I realise I speak the truth. Since arriving at St Jerome I've cleaned the nave daily, but I've not seen the veiled beauty that's been there, above me, all this time.

Elizabeth briefly contorts herself. 'Very pretty,' she says. 'But I think you'd better get up from the floor. You can't lie down in the church. It's disrespectful of Christ our Lord.'

'Leave her be.' Father Murray peers over Elizabeth's shoulder at me, his cheerful eyes barely visible over the top of a large cardboard box he's carrying. He bends, placing the box on the ground and, before either of us guess his intentions, he lays on his back next to me.

I turn my head slightly, my cheek chafed by the cold slate floor. His round belly protrudes from the folds of his

cassock, revealing a brightly patterned shirt and he spreads his arms until his fingertips touch mine.

'Aaah,' he sighs. 'It's beautiful.'

'Father Murray!'

Elizabeth sounds distressed and so I start to move, sluggishly, for I'm still weighted by the essence of this place. Father Murray moves his fingers, just enough to clasp my wrist and prevent me from rising. 'Stay,' he says. 'There's also worship in watching a sunbeam. Where better than here?' He turns his head, the few tufts of white hair left covering his baldness uncombed as usual, and now richly coloured with a reflection of St Michael fighting off Lucifer.

I start to laugh. I laugh so hard the sound floats upwards, mingling with the flickering colours as the sun rises higher and streams into the nave.

Father Murray is laughing too, and I hear him say. 'Join us, Elizabeth and see what God is like from here.'

I stop laughing when Elizabeth, tight-lipped, shakes her head and picks up the box he discarded. 'This is...inappropriate,' she says, before disappearing towards the office.

Father Murray and I lie quietly. Somehow, the colours have lost their radiance and I'm no longer at peace.

'Not everyone believes the colours dance,' the old priest murmurs. He rolls over with a groan. 'And I shouldn't be lying here at my age.'

I spring upright and hold out a hand to help him, brushing off the specks of dust on his cassock and rearranging it. It falls neatly once again, hiding the bright orange flowers of the shirt he wears beneath it. 'I like your shirt,' I tease, daringly.

Another laugh rocks him back on his feet. 'I like colours,' he says. 'God isn't only in black and white.'

I shrug uncomfortably, remembering Elizabeth's disquiet, and I watch the last of the colours fade from the altar as the sun rises too high to shine directly into the nave. As suddenly as they appeared, they're gone. If I hadn't witnessed it myself but a few moments ago, I wouldn't have dreamt such beauty existed.

The figure hanging on the crucifix draws my gaze. Had I found this beauty before and forgotten it in the pain of growing out of childhood? I hear Ted's words echo in my mind. Cross or grace, Catherine, it's your choice. Have I looked only at the pain of my skin for so long I'm no longer able to see the colour of love in everything?

It's all too much for me; the maelstrom that has beckoned before, reaching out from the altar, pouring down from the wooden cross, again threatens me as Ted did, when we stayed on the beach and I released my pain into his embrace.

The darkness roils within me; pushing up from my depths. Does it seek to destroy the beauty of the colours I've seen? Or does it seek to become one with it? Either way, I'm

drowning in it; sinking into the shadows of my heart. And, aware now of how the sun lights up the colours living in the windows of St Jerome's chapel, I begin to hunger. Can the sun rise and scorch away the blackening of my soul, freeing me from the colourless, loveless prison I've lived for longer than I can remember?.

'It'll be all right.' Father Murray is before me, digging under his voluminous cassock to find a handkerchief. He dabs at my face, wiping away tears I'm unaware of. 'Learn to trust again.' Muffled with the wisdom of the ages, his whisper reaches me through the layers that ebb and flow around me.

'Trust who?' I whisper back, thinking of Ted and the old flower seller, before she melted away into my history.

'Love,' the old priest says, and glances towards the wooden crucifix, still staring down on me, but now with a suggestion of a smile on its carved lips. 'What's in your heart,' he adds.

Then Father Murray stretches a hand forward, touching but not touching, my chest, just above where my heart is pulsing with ever quickening beats. 'Love is in here,' he says, 'in you.' And he pulls his hand away, bringing it up open-palmed against his own chest, adding, 'And in me. If we seek the inward truth.'

I burn with a desire for freedom that jumpstarts all I'd thought long dead and trapped in a past I believed in. I gasp with fright, wanting to flee and yet wanting to stay, in this

sacred place which exerts such a pull. 'Elizabeth. She's the one who knows how to love. Not me. Never me,' I say.

'Go to her then,' he says, retreating behind the altar, reaching beneath it for his incense. As I leave, without saying more, I hear the scrape of a match. And the smell of hyssop curls its way after me as thin, fragrant smoke rises above the soft murmur of Father Murray's prayers for the war dead.

Elizabeth is alone in the office, her back to the door as she unseals the tape holding her box closed.

'Where's Ted?' I ask, startling her, for she jerks the box cutter, slashing deeply into the lid.

'In the garden,' she says, arching over the box as if to protect it from further harm, hunching her shoulder at me. Elizabeth doesn't mention finding me lying on my back in the nave, but she's still upset, her mouth tense around the edges. She lays the box cutter down with a clatter and quickly removes the half-opened box, placing it neatly out of the way between her desk and her cupboard. 'I'll finish unpacking that later,' she says. 'We need to start work.'

I want to apologise. To return to our usual friendliness. But I'm embarrassed and not sure how to breach the sternness of her faith. We begin work, silent for hours, except for normal office noises.

The silence isn't like the silences we shared before; or even those I now share with Ted on the mornings Elizabeth is with Carol Wiseman. There's a wretchedness in the air. Each time I glance across she is ripe with unrelenting disapproval. I try not to search Elizabeth's face for signs of forgiveness. When our gazes accidentally meet, I tentatively smile, hoping the old Elizabeth will peep out of the brittle green eyes. But she remains lost to me, until just before lunch time.

'I'll be leaving now,' she says. 'I may be back late. If Father Murray asks, tell him Clyde emailed last night. He wants me to get the pharmacy to send more medical supplies.'

'Okay,' I say casually, as if we'd been speaking all morning. 'I'll stay to answer the telephone if you want.'

'Thanks,' she says, with a flicker of her old smile. I blink my eyes in relief. When I open them, she's standing, digging in her handbag for her car keys, as she says, 'I don't have time for this today. There's so much to do.'

'Don't rush,' I say, as an idea creeps into my thoughts.

She nods, giving me another brief smile. I smile widely back, but she's already disappeared through the door. I stay where I am, peering at the half-opened cardboard box she still has to unpack. If I do it, will I please her? Please her enough to forgive my small, foolish transgression of this morning?

Without any further thought, I push my chair back and hurry over to lift the box onto her desk. As I start slicing

through the remaining tape, I pause. Is what I'm doing right? But as our friendship has grown Elizabeth has often trusted me with tasks such as this. So I peel the lid back and suddenly I'm alight, all the grimness of the day forgotten.

WINSTON'S PRINTERS.

That's the name stamped across the tissue paper covering the box's contents: Elizabeth's wedding invitations.

I'm as excited as if I were the bride. Carefully, I lift the flimsy layers to reveal row after row of exquisite cream and gold envelopes. I comb my fingers across the tops of the envelopes and sigh with happiness. Somewhere, I exult, somewhere under my fingertips, lies my invitation. My first invitation, a doorway into a new way of life.

I never earned much in prison; I don't earn much here. But when one has no-one to spend one's money on, it soon accumulates. I've already bought Elizabeth's wedding gift. And a special wedding outfit to wear. Usually, shopping is a chore. The rudely curious stares of the people I meet make it a torture. I avoid it, except for necessities, but for Elizabeth, I ignore all the rudeness.

When I loved Agnes, I was a child, a penniless orphan. I could only give her a bunch of wild flowers, or roses pinched from the same bushes she tended with such care. To feel the money thickening my wallet; to spend it on Elizabeth's wedding adds to my joy as I search for just the right gift. And when I find the delicate rose bowl I know it is perfect. Real silver,

it's more expensive than I'd planned, but it's worthy of my friend Elizabeth.

Sometimes at night, after I've turned out the lights, I imagine myself, dressed in my new silk suit, watching Elizabeth walk down the aisle. Then I see myself walking into the reception hall where a radiant Elizabeth stands next to her Clyve welcoming their guests, their friends. And me.

I imagine her face as I give her the gift.

'Oh, you shouldn't have, Cathy!' she'll say graciously, bending to kiss my cheek.

I'll smile with contentment and move to my seat, a guest at a wedding, like any normal person. I'll meet Elizabeth's other friends and, perhaps if I'm lucky, there'll be one or two as kind as she is, blind to my skin and happy to let me call them friend.

It's only a dream, so far, but the contents of this box make it real. Unable to resist the lure, I begin to flip through the envelopes, passing the A's, then the B's, until I come to the C's.

My heart squeezes into numbness as I search and do not find one with my name on. Then it beats into life again. This is a formal wedding; the invitations will be formally addressed. I turn to the initial of my surname, my hands trembling as I anticipate the elegance of my name printed in the flowing calligraphy adorning the other envelopes I've already foraged through.

There is nothing.

It's a mistake, I tell myself. Or I've missed it in my hurry. I start again. From the A's, passing over the invitation with *Father Elisha Murray* written in bold black letters, all the way to the end of the Z's.

Still nothing.

I can't stop the tremors. It's there - somewhere. It must be. Elizabeth promised. She promised, and she won't go back on a promise to a friend. Not Elizabeth. She's too good a person; her faith is too strong. Somewhere, I remember, there's a commandment: Thou shalt not lie.

I shake my head, instinctively denying my thoughts. It's inevitable, I console myself, that with the large number of invitations there will be mistakes. That my invitation is one of those errors is unfortunate. But the pinpricks of an old rage uncoil within me: the good sister Agnes lied when she said she loved me; that God loved me. Why not Elizabeth, when she said she was my friend?

'What are you doing?' She speaks harshly, bumping me aside as she reaches for her box, hauling it close into her body. 'That's private!'

'You're back early,' I say. My voice is as cold as the hell I'm revisiting. The one where I no longer believe love is possible. Even friendship, it seems, does not belong in this bitter, lonely place I call my life.

'I'm not staying. I came to collect the list of supplies Clyve wants. I left them in my drawer.' She pauses, and places a hand protectively over the invitations, still resting in their cardboard coffin. 'Why were you scratching in my box?'

This is Elizabeth I tell myself and I'm reminded of how private she was before we become friends, never letting me see what she was working on, hardly opening her cupboard door in case I saw what was in there.

'I thought I'd help you.' I speak as one would to a nervous cat. The mildness of my tone calms her.

'Oh,' she says, looking as foolish as I felt this morning, when she found me spread-eagled before the altar.

I hesitate, but suspicion cuts into me once more. I say casually, 'I picked up some errors in the invitations.'

Arrested, her hand hovers over the tissue paper I'd laid aside so neatly. 'There can't be! I have to post them this week to give people time to reply.'

I shrug, and wait, and feel the coldness spread into every corner of my soul.

'What mistakes?' she asks cautiously, gathering the tissue paper up in a rush and haphazardly covering the boxed invitations with it. Why do I feel she's acting guilty?

'Not all the names on the guest list have had their invitations printed. The guest list I typed.'

Elizabeth has it all, I marvel. Even when she blushes she's still attractive.

'How many are missing?' she asks. As if she doesn't already know.

'One,' I say, and let the silence drag out until the coldness seeps out of me and into the room, reaching out for Elizabeth and freezing the blush out of her cheeks. Then I add, 'Mine.'

I wait. Just as I waited for Agnes to lift her gaze from the body of her dead lover as they took me away. Elizabeth doesn't disappoint me in this. I always knew she was stronger than Agnes.

'There's an explanation for that,' she says, straightening her shoulders. She fusses with the lid of the box; then slides a furtive glance at me. And the dank smell of betrayal nearly chokes me as she says, 'Carol says-'

'It's not Carol's wedding,' I interrupt harshly. 'It's yours.'

'But...you can't want to come!'

'I do.'

'You don't know anyone.'

'I'll make new friends.'

'People will stare at you.'

'I'm used to it.'

'Don't be like this, please, Cathy,' she says, breathily, hurt and bewildered and somehow believing in her own innocence. 'Please don't be hurt! I'm not a person who wants to hurt anyone! It's not in my nature.'

She believes it. I can see it in the fervent gleam of her eyes and hear it in the slightly aggrieved tone in her voice. I give up the fight. I lost my friend Elizabeth long ago, for she existed only in my hope.

'I know,' I say, more tired, more defeated even than when I lost my Agnes.

'I'm not an unkind person,' she says. 'I did it for you, Cathy, to stop all of Clyve's friends staring at you like a freak in a circus. That's what Carol says will happen if you come.'

I ignore her and trudge to the door, needing to escape before the ice encasing my whole body thaws and my rage escapes its frozen prison.

'Do you really want to come?' Her uncertain question stops me.

'No,' I say. 'I was only being polite.' I laugh, bitterly, at the almost comic relief that floods her eyes.

She says more but I am already running. Past the goddamn nave and its goddamn false promises of the beauty of a new day dawning, brightly coloured and full of life. I ignore everything: the startled face of Father Murray, the almost naked man suffering on his wooden cross and the ubiquitous smell of incense.

I slam out the doors and into the pouring rain. What happened to the bright sunshine of this morning? I stand there

gasping, letting the warm rain mingle with my tears.

Disoriented for a moment, I hesitate.

Then I remember the relic of Grace. Clumsily I start to run again, my legs weighted with hatred and rage at one more betrayal. I crash through the gate, into the garden of remembrance and stumble, clutching the serene marble angel decorating the ground where Grace Odette Templeton's ashes lie, the old round scar in the palm of my hand aching with the contact.

'Why?' I sob. 'Why?'

The wind, bringing the storm in off the sea, sucks my cry away. It licks my face with raindrops and washes me clean as it soaks into the depths of my soul. Huddled at the foot of Grace's angel, I finally surrender to the pain. For this time I have no more rage to hold it at bay. The power of the lightening, sizzling and thundering overhead, has stripped away the heat of my anger, leaving only the yawning emptiness of another loss.

This painful nothingness, holding me in its grip, must be what death is like. It's comforting. Almost peaceful in the billowy darkness. My grief passes its zenith and here, curled beside Grace's ashes, wrapped in the warm wetness that could be a mother's womb, I hurt no longer. My cries dribble into silence and I float...float...above the hole in my chest, where once my heart used to beat with faith and hope and love. It beats no longer and the silence is my shield.

'Catherine.'

So far away. Hardly audible.

'Catherine.'

Ted calls again. Heavy with the lassitude of a new peace I flicker my lashes. Shut them again. The light is too bright, too white. Ted is in there. Somewhere. Tired. Too tired of all the suffering. Sink into the emptiness. Let it pull me deeper.

'Come back, Catherine.' He speaks more harshly, his hands pumping my chest, shaking me loose from the folds of the velvet night calling to me. 'It's not yet time. Come back!'

He is so urgent, so demanding. I open my eyes.

And take up the struggle again. My heart slowing, starting to beat as Ted leans back on his heels, removing one hand and swiping rainwater off his face. The sleeve of his black leather jacket holds the rain in perfect, single droplets. Each drop clings until it can cling no longer, then it, too, surrenders to a stronger will and rolls off transformed, as it strikes the ground, into one harmonious whole at his feet.

'Go away,' I mumble. 'I'm happy like this.'

He gives a soft laugh, his hand insistent on my shoulder turning me around. 'You are happy,' he agrees. 'But I don't think you realise it yet.'

I swot away his hand, the action exacerbating my hurting hands, scoured open as I fell against Grace's angel, and lean back against the marble angel, drawing my feet up under me.

The rain has stopped now and, in the Garden of Remembrance, everything shines with a radiance that offers me a new freedom.

'Happiness is a lie. Like friendship.' Exhausted with clinging to it for so many years, I make no effort to hide my bitterness.

Ted takes my hand between his, gently dabbing at the blood, slowly oozing out of the old round scar in my palm, the letters of his tattooed fingers blurring. L-O-V-E over P-E-A-C-E; P-E-A-C-E over L-O-V-E; on and on.

'That's a lie too,' I say, jerking away and indicating his hands. 'There is no love in this world. Or peace. It's all selfish lies. Look at Elizabeth.'

'Yes,' he agrees, 'find the truth in Elizabeth.' He shifts until he's sitting next to me. 'But look inward first. First find the truth there.'

I close my eyes and reach for my rage against Elizabeth. Here, with Ted sharing the solidness of Grace's angel, I can remember it but I can't feel it. So, methodically, I set about reminding myself of why I should hate her.

'She's a hypocrite.'

'It's a wall,' Ted says. 'She's built it to shore herself up against her weakness.'

'She calls it faith.'

'It's her difference to you,' he replies.

'She's an ambitious social climber.'

'It's her hope,' Ted says, 'for a future better than her past.'

'She's a liar! She breaks promises!' The anger, the pain, sluggishly try to claw back to life.

'She calls it love,' he says. 'But she doesn't know what love is. Is that a mortal sin? Not to know the love that endures? If it is,' his lips twitch, his impartial sea eyes not leaving my face, 'then we should all be doomed.'

And I'm tumbled from the tower of my loneliness in a lightening strike as fierce as those that have recently swept in off the sea.

I see in what he says much of what I've seen in those I've called both friend and foe. I am Elizabeth; I am Agnes; I am all those who, fleeing, curse me as the Devil. It is my immutable bond with them all: I, too, have seen them as different, when the only real difference is whether the view was theirs or mine. Cross or grace, Ted said to me earlier, and until now I've chosen the cross and not the grace.

I sigh, and bend my head forward onto my knees. Turning my head sideways, I glance at Ted. He is smiling gently at me, his preternatural eyes glowing deeply, powerfully. And I'm swept away to a place I've never been before.

'You've got it, Catherine,' he whispers, and his hand reaches out to rest on the crown of my head. 'You've got it.'

'What is it?' I choke, not really understanding; fearful and afraid of the richness in this moment.

'Love,' he says. 'What you're feeling is love.'

He pushes himself to his feet; sweeping away bits of mud and grass. 'Don't go,' I say, suddenly afraid I'll never see him again.

'I'm not leaving yet,' he says. 'I still have to fetch Granny May.'

'Oh,' I reply, and chew the inside of my lip, uncertainty rushing through me. 'Help me. How do I choose?'

'You'll know. Look with-'

'-with my inner eye,' I interrupt, finding a weak grin somewhere.

'That's right. Your heart's voice,' he says, 'will tell you the truth. It'll keep you free. Free from the differences.'

He throws his head back, laughing as he did with the old crone, his black hair loose, the silver cross in his ear glinting in the sun sliding out from behind the dissipating storm clouds, bathing him in beautiful golden light. Promising me another vision of the new day I long for. Only this time, I get to choose the colour of my freedom.

Faith or doubt. Hope or despair. Love or hatred.

Peace or war.

Which will I choose for the rest of my life?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ELIZABETH

The Present

'Cathy said she didn't want to come to my wedding,' Elizabeth says to Carol Wiseman as they sit together on the white expanse of the bed Carol usually shares with her husband. 'But she's hardly spoken to me for days.'

'Forget her,' Carol says, the sharp clink of her wine glass on the bedside table startling Elizabeth. 'She said she was only being polite. Stop worrying.'

Curling her bare feet up underneath her, Elizabeth leans back. She's so at ease in this room now, it's hard to remember the fear she felt when first she lay on this same bed. Slowly, in the weeks since Clyve has been at war, she begins to relax in the Wiseman house.

They'll start with a casual supper, just Carol and her, then they'll come up here. The first time Carol leads her into

the bedroom after dinner, she almost panics, not knowing what to expect. Then Carol slides open a cupboard door, revealing a large, expensive television set.

'Let's watch a movie,' she says, and the pattern is set for all the visits after.

It's good, Elizabeth thinks, to have a friend like Carol. She's learning so much and she's gaining inner confidence daily. When Clyve returns he won't recognise her. She'll be more than just a Templeton wife. She'll be Elizabeth. In charge. In control. And impeccable.

There are, of course, still times when she's nervous. Like when Carol brings up a bottle of wine that first evening. She refuses the glass Carol offers her.

'One glass won't hurt you,' Carol said, her eyes gleaming in the subdued lighting.

Elizabeth smells only her Father. And remembers the taste of the wine the evening she first kissed her own demon. Her heart thump-thumps and she slides back into a moonlit night, sinking into eyes that belong to another Wiseman.

'It's just the two of us,' Carol adds. 'Relax your control and enjoy yourself for once.'

It would be good, Elizabeth thinks, to relax the tight rein she holds on herself. To slip loose from those fetters which hide the real Elizabeth Johnson, the daughter of drunken Sam, from the world. To just dive deep into the ocean of experience without worrying about drowning. She picks up the

glass, and finishes it slowly, keeping quiet when Carol fills it up again. And, later, she falls asleep there, waking up entwined with Carol, who laughs at her embarrassment.

'You're so shy, Elizabeth,' she says, 'and sweet. Don't be embarrassed; it's just us girls alone.'

In the face of her amusement, Elizabeth shrugs off the unfamiliarity of waking up to someone who wasn't male and Clyve. And so sleeping overnight in the Wiseman's marriage bed, while her demon is away from home, becomes a regular habit.

Stretching out an arm to drink from her own glass, she leans back into the luxurious padding behind her.

'I like the evenings we spend together,' she says shyly.

Carol turns from where she's inserting a DVD into the player and smiles. 'I'm glad you do.'

Elizabeth means what she says. But, to her surprise, she finds that she somehow misses the early morning time with Cathy. Not that they had a regular arrangement, but Cathy had quietly been there for her when she needed her, and now that was gone.

Since Carol advised Elizabeth not to invite Cathy to her wedding, she'd asked herself again and again, rubbing her empty wrist, and murmuring over and over like a mantra: w.w.j.d? Jesus, she'd decided, would not subject someone like

Cathy to the pain of seeing what she could never have. Cathy had agreed she was just being polite in saying she'd wanted to go. And yet...the albino has withdrawn into a place where Elizabeth finds herself unable to follow.

She still has Carol's friendship, but how can she tell someone as worldly as Carol she's certain she's about to save Granny May's soul? The old woman has begun to show an interest in St Jerome's, convincing Elizabeth it won't be long before she gets Granny May to join her at services. Cathy would've shared her excitement, if only she could tell her. She sighs, and sips again from her wine glass.

Carol slips a comforting arm around her shoulder. 'You're too tender-hearted for your own good,' she says. 'You did what's best for that outré creature. She should appreciate your concern for her.'

'I did it for her own good,' Elizabeth agrees, and then adds, 'You understand me. Not even Clyve understands me so well.'

'You're easy too understand,' Carol says, leaning back next to Elizabeth, laughing quietly. 'Easy,' she adds, stroking her hand up and down, up and down, Elizabeth's arm.

The soothing rhythm and the wine soon have Elizabeth's head drooping. She's come to realise Carol is a "toucher". Almost every sentence, every action the other woman makes involves a finger stroking a cheek; a hand brushing an arm, or a kiss and a hug.

'Darling, people like us do it all the time,' Carol had said. 'When you're one of us, you'll be doing it too.'

Embarrassed at her gaucherie, determined to be "one of us", Elizabeth works hard at stopping herself from flinching. She even forces herself to return the touches, as naturally as she can. Now she doesn't resist as her head slips into a comfortable spot on Carol's shoulder. It even reminds her of an almost forgotten memory.

Hiding behind the cupboard; waiting to see which Father is coming home. The one who had left the house early in the morning, or the one who speaks in the stiff and careful manner, his breath heavy with the scent of his demon. And Mother was there too, stroking a hand up and down, up and down, Elizabeth's arm, just so, telling her she's special, she's somebody, she's A Johnson.

She still hears their voices. Father's deep, Mother's lighter tones, but this time they aren't arguing. There's a note of raw desiring in the voices, and she half pushes herself upright but the light voice - Mother's voice, no, Carol's voice - says 'Hush. Go back to sleep.' A pillow slides beneath her head as she's gently lowered back onto the mattress.

'Mother,' she murmurs, the memories making her anxious.

'Don't be afraid. You don't have to be afraid.'

But she is afraid. In the depths of her dream she remembers the fear that Father will come and find her. His

hands will drag her out from the warm cocoon between the wall and the cupboard. The next day, while he forgets in drunken innocence, the bruises on her arms and on her legs brand her shame into her essence, forever whispering, 'A Johnson is somebody, Elizabeth, and don't you forget it. A Johnson must have pride!'

She struggles a bit, as the hands shake her body, suddenly shivering as the cool night air brushes her skin with tender fingers. She's not scared any more, she thinks, and it's the duet of voices, soothing, murmuring, calming even as the hands, more than one, more than two, knead her fear into something warmer, dangerously seductive. She twists her way through the layers of uncertain sleep to find Mother and Father, but the closer she gets to them, the more they separate into different words and different voices.

'She's waking up,' Carol says.

Elizabeth opens her eyes to stare into Carol's face. Not the face of her friend Carol. The eyes have changed: there's a hunger in them she can't explain. She's seen it in the mirror, sometimes, in the mornings after she's lain restless with nameless appetites after Clyve has rolled off her, contented, but leaving Elizabeth yearning for the impossible.

Carol smells different too. Like the acrid poison Ted used to spray the parish garden before he brought Carol into the office. It trickles down her nose, into the back of her throat. As Elizabeth coughs, as she surfaces into full

wakefulness, she realises this smell frightens her more than the smell that hung around her Father, the nights he carefully squinted, concentrating on staying upright as he used the back of his hand to teach her about the pride of being a Johnson.

Blinking foolishly, she drops her eyes from Carol's and gasps in shock. Carol is naked, as naked as she is, and that look, that hunger in Carol's eyes, keeps her frozen as Carol lifts a hand, closing it tightly on Elizabeth's breast, her naked breast. Capturing Elizabeth's gaze again, she leans forward and places her lips, open-mouthed and damp with relish, on the other breast and Elizabeth gasps a sob, even as she closes her eyes against the horror. The damp, delicious horror of what she wants and what she feels.

From somewhere above her, or behind her, there is another voice. She cannot tell, because the feeling and the licking and the loving are like a fire in her blood, consuming her. And so she hardly hears Simon when he says, 'It's been a long time, Milkmaid. Did you miss me?'

The shock of his voice, the fulfilment of her quiescent dream, forces the heaviness from her eyelids. She snaps them open. It's just the two of them now. Her demon and her. Both naked. He's stretched out behind her, pressing his heated length against her as he kisses and strokes her until she begins to sink beneath the turbulent waters sucking her in, swallowing her into the belly of the ocean monster that

devoured the sinners abandoned by Noah as the ancient flood waters rose and rose and rose.

Languorous with the inevitability of it, she turns her head to peer over her shoulder. 'Where's Carol?' she asks.

'She'll be back,' he says. 'When you want her again.'

'Why did she do this?' she moans, half in despair, half in pleasure, as he flips her over to face him and mounts her with one smooth, slick movement she's hardly aware of.

'You did it to yourself, Elizabeth.' He begins to move rhythmically and she moans her pleasure, clawing his back, his shoulders, reaching for what she hasn't felt in all the long years of resisting him. 'Because I'm what you've always wanted.' He laughs, and then croons, 'I'm your temptation.'

'You're my demon' she cries. She closes her eyes again, shutting out his devil's face, and closes her conscience against the thought of Clyve. Her love, her forgotten saviour, lost to her somewhere in a desert fighting a war to free people too far away for her to care about, while she is here. Lying here, beneath another man, knowing that - no matter how many times she's prayed, no matter how many times she's tried to cleanse herself from this sin by invoking Jesus' name - her own desires ultimately betray her.

There is no fight left in Elizabeth. Finally, fully, she capitulates.

'I've missed you,' she says, and opens her arms and her body to Simon's welcome invasion, surrendering to that part of

her which lives on within her. Two Elizabeths, one saint, one sinner. Just as there were always two Fathers in her childhood, one smelling as sweet as a white rose in winter; the other sour and bitter with the smell of a triumphant evil.

A long time later, how long she can never remember, she lies there naked as the day they dragged her from her mother's womb, but not as innocent. Never as innocent, for she was born into her father's sin.

Next to her, Simon stirs, then pushes himself upright to stare at her. 'Do you still think this,' his hand sweeps an arc over the rumpled sheets, her nakedness, 'is evil, Elizabeth?'

The sound of her name on his lips enthralls her. It sanctions what they've shared in this bed: he recognises her soul, as she recognises his. She shakes her head slowly, from side to side, and puts out a hand to annex his chest, flesh of her flesh. For a moment, as her palm collides with the solidness of him, she is shaken, for he is cold, colder than ice and she has a strange thought: what if there is no fire in hell, only ice?

She skitters her gaze upwards and a long ago shame tries to break into her consciousness. But she's not the naïve believer she was then. She has learnt, ironically from this man's wife, that by her resistance of him, she's conquered her

demon and wrapped herself in the forgiveness of her saviour. She has learnt, too, that as her God forgives, she must forgive herself the humanity bred of her father's legacy: that, like him, she is both saint and sinner, entwined in a single restless, seeking body made nascent one long ago moonlit night. And, in the forgiving of that almost incomprehensible duality, she found herself again. The self born on a dewy morning outside the old school gates, where an answered prayer showed her kindness will be her way.

Watching her hand tracing the whorls of dark hair covering Simon's chest she tells herself the balcony loving never hurt Clyve. She suffered for it, wasting so much of her life on a penance as painful as it was unnecessary. There was no unkindness to Clyve and there was no sin.

So when Simon asks again, she answers cautiously. 'It's not evil,' she says, 'if no-one is hurt.' It feels right to her. Keeping quiet to protect Clyve from hurt will wipe away the sin. For she is strong again, and her evil has no face she needs fear. It's simply her humanity, tempered with the saving grace of her kindness; the kindness she diligently shows to everyone. And it is kind, she tells herself, not to tell Clyve that, although she loves him, she wants Simon. 'So don't talk of this to anyone. Especially not Clyve when he comes back from The War.'

'I won't,' he says and laughs. 'You surprise me.'

'I do?'

'There's no moral outrage this time,' he grins. 'No rattling of crucifixes to keep you safe from your demon?'

It makes her angry, that grin, with its sly, secretive jubilation. 'I'm not hurting anyone,' she says, keeping her voice as quiet and dignified as her nudity allows. 'Why should I feel outrage?'

'Why?' he asks and howls with laughter. 'What a convenient faith you have,' he says, adding, 'And you're not alone...luckily for me, or I'd be an eternally lonely man.'

Elizabeth, before she finds herself in his arms once more, almost panics. For, deep in his face, in the piercing black eyes swallowing up her very soul, she sees what she could become. And knows it's only her faith, the strength of her faith, which lies between her and a life in which there is only one part of her Father's legacy left: the sinner.

She leaves the Wiseman mansion late the next morning, without having seen Carol again. Driving home slowly she tries to shake a feeling of unease, uncurling deep within her, a murmur that takes on a voice of its own. Flicking the indicator on, Elizabeth turns into the driveway of the Templeton mansion and can't help wondering if her discomfort is more to do with doubt than faith.

But what is there to doubt, she reasons? Her wedding is barely two weeks away; Clyve will be home shortly before that.

And he'll be happy. As she is happy now. A woman made whole by faith and friendship and forgiveness, she will make Clyve a good wife. Better than before Simon, before Carol. Because now the yearnings she felt in Clyve's arms have a name and a face, and she no longer has to resist it. And, wrapped in her belief that as long as Clyve doesn't get hurt, Elizabeth contents herself with the assurance that sleeping with Simon won't be a sin but rather a surrender to the power of faith: her faith in God and His forgiveness of her humanity.

She's smiling as she draws the car to a halt at the bottom of the stairway that sweeps up to the main entrance hall. As she climbs out of the car, she glances back over the driveway, past the huge iron gates and over the sea, dull and grey and choppy even though there are hardly any clouds on the horizon.

It's only as she's halfway up the stairs that she sees the three figures standing there, like some distorted trinity. Father Murray, small and rotund, wearing a worried frown. His arm is around Granny May, dressed as she always is, in a severe navy suit, unadorned by any jewellery. And behind them, tall and stern, a man in military uniform.

'Clyve?' she says, wondering if he'll smell Simon on her. She feels guilty even though she's chosen to believe it's not a sin she's committed, because a sin is much bigger than the invisible little foibles of a restless humanity. But, even as she speaks, she sees the hair is not blonde, but silver. And

he's not Clyve, but a man she's never seen before staring at her with an uncomfortable pity.

She realises, she realises then, the day has gone wrong. None of this should have happened. But it has. It's her faith, she realises. A fragile faith that has too easily led her astray. For, Elizabeth discovers as Father Murray steps forward, saying her name, it's too easy to deceive oneself into believing what one wants to believe. And the last vestiges of her faith crumble under the onslaught of her heart's voice crying out:

Father. Clyve. Simon. God.

All have failed you, and you are alone.

Elizabeth, trying to block out the incessant cry, flings her hands up to cover her ears. But it doesn't stop the truth from sinking in: she is alone.

Without faith. Without hope.

And without love.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MAY

The Present

The time is close now. It's been lonely, lonelier than I could've imagined since I lost my husband Harry. He died fifteen years ago, but he was gone from me long before then.

And my son. My little Harry. Grace used to call him an angel, and he never lost that smile in his eyes. It only gleamed with a different brightness when he brought a young woman home, nineteen to his twenty and laden with his child in her belly.

'You're too young to marry,' I said.

'We're in love, Ma. We're going to marry.'

I often think he must still have been smiling, when they died, the two of them together, in a distant land fighting to save the lives of those wounded in a war which should never have begun.

'People aren't collateral damage, Ma,' he said the day they left, his face wrinkled with the same determination he used to climb up and down stairs that were bigger by far than he. 'We want to help. It'll be an adventure.'

'Foolish boy,' I snapped, burying my tears in the warm baby smell of my grandson Clyve. 'Kiss your son. Then say goodbye to your father and me.'

His answer was a laugh, as reckless as always, and I never saw either of them again. But I had Clyve. My grandson, as placid and malleable as his grandfather Harry. Until he, too, decided he wanted to go to war.

After Grace died, and I staggered out her room, calling, calling for someone to help, Enoch was already gone. He'd gone without saying goodbye; he must have left as Grace was breathing her last. It was Father Murray who came bustling into the room, another man - the doctor - behind him.

'She's dead,' the medic declared importantly. 'Her heart killed her,' he added.

I wanted to scream at them It was me! It was me! I murdered her! But I couldn't get the words out I was crying too deeply.

'She's distraught,' someone said later.

It's what they all said, the day we buried Grace's ashes in the Garden of Remembrance at St Jerome's. They crowded

round Harry and me, faces dim with the loss of their light, their Grace. Patting me on the shoulder, on the arm, consoling me even as they whispered in surprise, 'We never knew May Templeton loved our Grace so much.'

The fools! The fools!

Could they not see evil when it was before them?

And Elizabeth is a fool. She thinks to save a soul as empty as mine. I laugh at her, so zealous in her calculated piety, and so blind. She's a woman who knows what she wants, but doesn't she realise how bleak her task is? Once, I had a chance of being saved. It died, more years ago than I care to remember, one moonlit night when a stranger turned his back on me.

Even Father Murray, no longer young and new to the parish, yet still as eager as he ever was, accedes the loss of this soul of mine. He came calling soon after Grace had died. I thought he'd come crusading as well, but he didn't bother asking why I hadn't been back to the chapel since the day of Grace's memorial service.

'Hello, Mrs Templeton,' he greets, when he sees me working on the roses. 'I'm glad I caught you at home.'

The rose garden was once Grace's joy, when she lived in the mansion. I'd let it decay in my yearning for what never could be. There is an emptiness in me, now I am beyond redemption. I fill it with small tasks such as this one, trying to save a little of Grace's light by tending the roses she loved so much.

'I'm busy,' I say, turning my back on him, concentrating my gaze on the shoots I'm carefully pruning.

'Grace would like seeing her roses so loved,' he says.

I ignore him, wanting him to leave, willing him to leave. There's a murmur of voices. His: jovial, comforting and encouraging. Another voice: brittle-edged and resistant, answering him. Curiosity makes me turn.

He's helping a young girl out the parish car. She holds herself stiffly, looking warily at the world from a face marred by bruises.

He introduces the girl when he sees me watching them. 'I spoke to Grace about her,' he says.

'No,' I say, knowing what he wants, terrified of what he wants. 'Never.'

'She needs help. Grace was going to help.'

I turn back to my roses and calmly snip away some unwanted dead wood which stops them from flowering as they should.

'Where's Enoch?' I ask.

'He left,' Father Murray says.

'Where's he gone?'

At first I think he isn't going to answer. Then, 'No place special,' the priest says. 'There wasn't much more he could do here.'

Mayflower lets loose a solitary howl of pain. I make no sound as I cut away a rotten branch with a vicious snip. I can't see the priest, my back is towards him, but in the silence that follows I feel him weighing what he must say next.

'Perhaps Enoch will be back.' He hesitates. 'One day.'

I swing around to glare at him. 'You've told me nothing, Father. Nothing!'

I bump him out the way with my angry, forceful stride and the young creature next to him flinches as I pass her. Mayflower, silent except for the groaning weight of her unshed tears, sees her too. I stop and examine the girl more closely. She stares back at me with Mayflower's despairing eyes, the same eyes that looked back at me from the mirror every day before May was born, and every day since Grace has died.

We stare at each other, we three: the young girl, Mayflower and me.

'What's your name, girl?' I hadn't listened to Father Murray's introduction, because hearing her name would've given her more substance than a pale shadow cowering behind a priest.

'Hope,' she whispers.

Such an incongruous name for such an abject creature. I want to laugh. Instead, I frown and, with a finger under her chin, lift her face to mine, closely examining the marks of her Daddy's love.

'You'll be safe here,' Mayflower says to the child before I can stop her.

I turn my frown on Father Murray, daring him to gloat. And, as I draw her away from his side, somehow I'm not surprised to hear him say, this time with certainty, 'Enoch will come back, Mayflower. One day he'll be back.'

In all the long, lonely years, Enoch has never returned, although Mayflower waits and waits. The girl Hope leaves for a new life, long before The War kills my son Harry and his wife. And, although Father Murray never once comes, as Elizabeth does, to read from the Bible and save my soul, he often visits. In the beginning, it's to see how Hope is doing; later, when I've moved from the mansion to the cottage that once belonged to Grace, he brings new visitors. Young girls who are Hope, only with different names. Mayflower takes them all in.

Only Elizabeth stays, but still the stranger does not return.

Elizabeth says she believes there is a God who answers the prayers of the living. This week, when Father Murray

arrives with another visitor. I pray it's Enoch he brings. Instead, it's a military officer, immaculate in his uniform and professionally sympathetic as he tells me Clyve, my placid, peace-loving grandson, has died a hero's death.

'He refused to leave the hospital, Ma'am,' the officer says. 'Even though his commander told him to leave the wounded because the insurgents were too close.'

'Why were they fighting?'

His lips thin with irritation, but he answers. 'We needed the place as a hospital, but the rebels wanted their holy ground back.'

I hear the faint echo of long ago hooves scraping along a dusty road, remembering the warmth of a stranger's arms and the sweet smell of cedar wood. I lived. Clyve did not. 'Did they get what they wanted?'

'We held them off, Ma'am,' he says proudly. 'But casualties were high. That's why your grandson wouldn't leave. There were too many wounded he needed to help. He died a hero.'

'He died.'

It's all I can say. All I can absorb, because as his words sink into the ocean depths of my heart, Mayflower is silent. There's not the slightest whimper from her: Mayflower is dead. I still breathe, but Mayflower has given up waiting, forever silenced by her despair.

I lean my head back against the chair, and see where Elizabeth has placed my old mahogany cupboard. It holds too many memories for me, memories of all I could've been if Enoch had loved me as he had once loved Grace.

I close my eyes against the pain. 'Have you told Elizabeth?'

'We wanted to tell you first,' Father Murray says quietly.

'We must tell her.' I try to rise, but my legs are weak with age or sorrow and with the death of a part of me I've lived with for aeons. Father Murray and the soldier rush to help me stand.

'You stay here, Mrs T,' Father Murray says. 'The Colonel and I will tell Elizabeth.'

I shake my head. 'My grandson loved her. He'd want me to be the one to tell her.'

And, although I don't tell them, there's also that part of me I hate, perhaps the eternal imprint of Mayflower's evil on my soul, that wants to hear how Elizabeth's God will answer her now.

The old sea city is angry. The wind is howling in off the sea; the clouds are thick and grey overhead, releasing a steady drizzle that suits my mood. A perfect day for a

funeral. And for the day I must return to St Jerome's parish, the first time after Grace's burial.

For both my Harrys' funerals, I'd demanded a service in the grounds of the Templeton mansion. Father Murray hadn't argued much. This time I'm too tired to exert my will, and the priest is too insistent.

'You must come to the Parish, Mrs T. It's time to return,' he says, over and over. 'You need to be there.'

'Elizabeth will cope without me,' I reply. 'She's been part of the parish for years. Many people will want to give her support. She doesn't need me.'

I almost didn't hear what his silence told me for the faint sound of a child's laughter captured me. Leaning toward the window facing the abandoned rose garden, I search amongst the wilderness for the flash of chubby legs gleefully evading the clutch of thorns. But it's only memories, for young Harry was dead years ago. And now Clyve, too, is lost and the screech of loneliness has become a crescendo.

Father Murray's stillness brings me back from an abyss of self-pity I despise in myself. I release my grip on the windowsill and turn to lean against it, my back towards the view. 'What is it?' I ask.

'Elizabeth has some problems,' he says. 'There are some ugly rumours going around.'

'About Elizabeth?'

'She's in debt. She owes some fashion designer in the city hundreds of thousands for new clothes.'

'That's not a problem.' I wave a hand dismissively.

'She's my grandson's fiancée. She has the Templeton money behind her.'

'Your grandson's dead, Mrs T,' he says. 'Elizabeth has no money of her own.'

The gentleness in his voice almost broke through my control, making me surly. 'It makes no difference,' I reply. 'It's only money. What use do I have for it now? And Clyde doesn't need it. He's dead.'

'There's more.'

But he doesn't tell me, until I prod him.

'Must I live in ignorance, Father, until the end of my days?'

A smile skims across the surface of his face. 'Not you, Mrs T, not you.' He rises from his chair and wanders to the window where I stand. 'There's been talk,' he says quietly, unwillingly. 'About infidelity. About...orgies.'

It surprises me, for Elizabeth has always struck me as being too much in charge of her passions. 'With whom?'

'Wiseman. Simon Wiseman. And his wife, Carol.'

I've heard the name before. It was whispered to me in the dark, by one of Father Murray's strays. He'd brought the young girl to me soon after Elizabeth had moved into the

mansion with Clyve and I'd moved into Grace's cottage. She'd taken a long time to heal, that one. And, recognising her own evil overlaid in the haunted eyes, Mayflower had wept bitterly for the scars on the girl's soul.

It is that same darkness which has touched Elizabeth. I think now of her, as she first was when she arrived on my doorstep. Scared, poorly dressed and half-starved, but with a core of steel I'd admired, for it reminded me of May. It was her God who had given her that steel. But he has deserted her, as he once deserted Mayflower.

And I think of the last time I saw Grace, lips blue with death, as I stood over her clutching a bottle of pills.

'Everyone has memories they regret,' I say, then I add, 'Do you have someone who can drive me to the parish in time for the funeral?'

'Ted will come,' he says. 'And Cathy.'

'I'll be ready for them.'

'Yes,' he replies. 'You will be.'

But I am suddenly weary; weary in a way I've never been before. I want him gone. I want to be alone, with only the sea, far beyond the edge of the garden, looking over me as I mourn my losses. Grace. My Daddy, dead of pneumonia, soon after Grace died. Both my Harry's gone. Now Clyve. I must mourn them, before I can begin to mourn the greatest loss of all.

Mayflower. Most especially I need to mourn Mayflower, who died waiting for a stranger who could not love one such as she.

And so I wait, on this dull, grey day, for the arrival of two different strangers. The pill box hat on my head matches my lavender shoes and purse. It's a colour I've grown comfortable in over the years, teamed with a charcoal suit and the pearls Harry gave me, before I gave them to Elizabeth. Right on time, I hear a car coming up the driveway.

At first, they are merely two silhouettes inside an old, dented vehicle. But, once the car coughs to a halt at the bottom of the stairs, the driver unwinds himself from behind the wheel, just as a ray of sunlight breaks through the thick layer of cloud dulling the day. He pulls himself out, one long, slender hand resting on top of the car door. His hair is black, and longer than I remember, long enough that it obscures his face as he stares towards the sea. All I can see of him is that elegant pianist's hand, with a flash of blue tattoos on his fingers, and the white and gold angel adorning the back of his leather jacket.

I cannot welcome him. There is no movement inside me; the depths of my heart where Mayflower lived are still. She has yearned too much and too long.

I swing my gaze to the other passenger. She is short, tiny and white. So white. Her eyes glow with a brilliance that almost blinds me. He - the stranger! the stranger! - leans towards her. She glances up at him as he points that artistic hand towards the sea. They share a smile, a look, so deep, they leak into each other, consumed and joined by a golden light I thought I'd never see again.

They glance at me sharply and start running towards me. I am not startled, for the resonance of my keening cry holds me stiff and upright.

Enoch! Enoch!

The sea wind bounces the name off the high walls of the mansion. Then it whips it away into a silence broken by the sound of my lavender purse crashing to the floor as I lift my hands to cover my face, trying to hide the sobs I cannot, do not, even try to control.

I am falling, fainting, with shock or joy. Then he is there, catching me, gently lowering me to the floor as he holds my head up from the cold stone slabs. His arms, the arms I have longed for, are around me and the sweet smell of cedar is in my nostrils. I am safe. I am home.

'Mrs Templeton.' A bottle, cold, wet, presses against my lips. 'Ted has you, Mrs Templeton, you'll be okay,' the woman's voice says again. 'Drink some water.'

I drag my eyes open and look into a face I've never seen before, but would recognise anywhere. Clyve has spoken of the

girl from the parish. The one with albinism. So has Father Murray. Elizabeth, he told me, has not been kind to her.

She's holding some bottled water to my mouth and I watch her over the rim. She is colourless, except for her eyes, almost hidden behind the thick lenses of her spectacles. Now the sun has disappeared again, and is no longer glancing off them, they do not glow so brilliantly. But they shine with another kind of light. Forged from aeons of pain, her eyes burn with the same compassion that lent beauty to Grace.

I can delay no longer. With a murmur, I put my hand over hers, feeling the softness of a bandage wrapped around her palm. Pulling my lips away from the water she offers, I twist my head to see the face hovering above me.

He is different. Younger than Enoch. And rougher. It's difficult to guess his age, because dark glasses cover his eyes.

'Ma'am,' he says, when he realises I'm watching him, and dips his head closer, the single silver earring bobbing and bouncing until I'm almost dizzy. 'Do you think you can sit up?' he asks.

I'm wheezing a bit from the awkward position I'm lying in. 'Not yet,' I say and slowly, dreamily, I lift a hand to touch his face. 'Where have you been?'

'The traffic delayed us; it took me longer to get here than I thought.'

I smile at his evasion, and play along. 'Who are you?'

He nods toward the young woman peering down at me, chewing her lip anxiously. 'This is Cathy, and I'm Ted. We work at St Jerome's parish with Father Murray.'

'I know that' I say, sorry that I sound peevish. 'But who are you?'

My fingertips are inching their way over his lips, so I feel their movement as he answers, 'Just who I said, Ma'am.'

He offers no resistance as I reach my destination. I remove the barrier of his sunglasses and I know. I know who he is and I dive deep. Deep, deep, into the eyes I have never forgotten. They draw me in, cocoon me in their swirling mist, until I can bear the joy no longer.

'Enoch,' I sigh.

'Ted,' he says. 'You must call me Ted now.'

I nod, happy to do what he wants. 'You came.' I say. 'You came to fetch me.'

'I made a promise,' he says quietly. 'It's not a long way to drive from the church.' Then he adds, as I chuckle at his little joke, 'Ma'am, if you're feeling better, we need to leave. The funeral starts soon.'

I carry on smiling as I nod and let them help me up. Cathy dusts me off, while Enoch - no, Ted, he wants me to call him Ted - bends from his great height to gather the scattered contents of my bag. Then, flanked on either side by the two of them, we walk down the stairs and into the car, a comfortable trinity.

The drive to St Jerome's is shorter than I remember. Little has changed, since the last time I saw it. There are people there, milling around. Dressed in black, with sombre looks on their faces, pretending to themselves they will remember their grief beyond the time it takes for them to consume the tea and cakes waiting for them in the parish hall.

Mostly they stand around in groups, mouthing platitudes. So sad. So tragic. He died so young. A hero. Who would've believed it of good old Clyve Templeton?

And I can see from the slyness of their faces there are other whispers too. The ones about Elizabeth, standing alone, pale and upright and hanging on to her control with all her strength. They ignore her, these good church people, although she was one of them until she fell. They turn to me, Clyve's friends, generations younger than me, most of whom have never seen me in St Jerome's.

'Clyve's grandmother. She helps abused children.'

'She's alone now. Poor woman.'

'She must be devastated. It's terrible that such a good person has to suffer.'

The whispers wing their way towards me, heavy with sympathy and loud with relief that, this time, they have escaped. They console themselves that their goodness, their God, will keep them safe. That this loss is mine to bear. They

forget that their God was Elizabeth's. And this grief is not only mine, but Elizabeth's too.

Elizabeth doesn't exist to them anymore. Now she is fodder for their judgement.

Next to me, Cathy lets out a sound that sounds like a snarl. 'It's not right,' she says, 'what they're doing to her. Can't they tell she's suffering?'

Ted mocks gently. 'I thought you hated her,' he says. I can tell from his voice he knows differently.

'I do,' Cathy says, frowning ferociously. 'It's still not right that people are so cruel to her, today of all days.'

'Why should you care?' he asks. 'After what she did to you.' The warm irreverence is a little more obvious this time.

She swears at him, a harsh word and ugly, but somehow it sounds like an endearment. Then she remembers she's in a churchyard, or that I'm standing between them. Either is enough to make her blush horribly. 'I'm sorry, Mrs Templeton.' Guiltily, she apologises. 'I forgot.'

I merely incline my head, ignoring the people gathering round us, all waiting for a chance to speak to me, to console me, when it's their own fears they're trying to hide from.

'I just-' Watching Elizabeth tentatively move forward to greet a late arrival, who walks past her as if she isn't there before he hurries to join the herd milling around us, Cathy falls silent. Then, 'Mrs T,' she says decisively. 'Will you be okay with only Ted to stand by you?'

'Where are you going?' he asks. I look up into his eyes, those sea eyes that probe so deeply, and I know he knows as well as I do where she is going. It's what Grace would've done.

'I'm getting a cup of coffee,' she replies aggressively. 'And I'm taking it to Elizabeth.'

'That's not hate,' he murmurs. 'That's love.'

The girl doesn't hear him. She's shouldering her way through the crowd, glaring with such ferocity at the latecomer who ignored Elizabeth that he skitters out of her way and surreptitiously makes the sign of the cross after she's passed.

Everyone watches as she returns to where Elizabeth stands isolated by, and unforgiven for, the choices she made. Cathy touches Elizabeth's arm, and I catch a glimpse of the bandage on her hand, splashed with red from the wound she's covering. As Elizabeth jerks with surprise, startled by the small human contact and almost knocks the cup to the floor, Cathy steps back.

And we watch as Elizabeth, cool, reserved Elizabeth, takes the coffee, stirs it once and then stops. Her head bows and her face crumples and her cries come to us, loud in the unnatural silence which has descended on the mourners. Cathy, after a small hesitation, gathers Elizabeth close. Her lips move in words of comfort we cannot hear, her eyes closed as

tightly as Elizabeth's, but not tightly enough to stop her tears mingling with those of the woman she holds in her arms.

There is an awkward shuffling, and some muted whispers, as the congregation listens to the sound of Elizabeth's pain. Then slowly, so it's not too obvious, one or two break away from the pack, and walk over to where Elizabeth stands, safe in the arms of her friend.

As I am safe, wrapped once again in the arms of a stranger.

'Take me to Grace,' I say, knowing Cathy will be there to stop Elizabeth drowning. She will be there, too, for all the lost and lonely strays yet to come. 'I want to see Grace again.'

Without a fuss, he leads me away from the crowds until we are alone. I can still hear them over the gate that leads me into the garden where Grace rests. They are far, far away from me, on the other side of the light. The light that once excluded me from the circle of Enoch and Grace's love. But this time I'm inside it, sharing it. I'm floating on feet as innocent as the day Mayflower was born. He takes me to stand in front of the marble angel guarding Grace's relics.

There is nothing: nothing but silence and light.

'Don't be afraid, Mrs T,' a quiet voice says. 'You're ready. This time you're ready.'

In the silence I hear the faint strains of a waltz.

'Will you dance with me, Ted? Here? Now?'

'With pleasure, Mrs T,' and he holds wide his arms.

I step into them, smiling at the thought that, since he brought Hope to me, Father Murray has called me Mrs T for years. But it's only when I hear it tinged with the lilt of ancient tongues that I realise I'm not as lost as once I had feared. Mayflower is gone, but when he calls me Mrs T, somehow I believe a young child's innocence still lives in a once-lost stray called Hope.

'Can you hear it, Ted? The music. Can you hear it?'

'I hear it.'

I let my head rest on his shoulder, and he gathers me close against him. So close I hear every beat of his heart as it waltzes in time to mine. 'I love you,' I say. 'I always have.'

'I know,' he says. He bends his head, his lips brushing the top of my hair, white now with age, and adds, 'I love you too, little Mayflower.'

I close my eyes against the blinding joy. I let myself fall into his heart, that great heart of his which pulses deep within us all. And, even as the distant sounds fade into the silence of the golden light, I believe that this time, I am ready.

I am ready to love.

And be loved.

T H E E N D

PART B

"And the Sea Looked"

A Novel in the Making

1. Introduction

Plato, in his Theory of Forms,¹ posits that man,² through his five senses, exists in imperfect contact with the ideas (such as "faith", "hope" and "charity") and objects (such as "pearl necklace", "gun" and "mansion") that comprise the Material World in which he lives. However, it is through his soul that man can also connect with another world: the Divine or Transcendental World. It is the ideas and objects of this second, superior world which are the "perfect" or "ideal" concepts or objects, not those available to man through his physical ability to touch, taste, feel, see and hear.

An artist, whether poet or prose writer, painter or musician, starts with his vision of an ideal object (a concept, a landscape, a sound) that only he has connected to. Through his art, he attempts to manifest that vision into a concrete form through which others can share in his unique perception of another version of reality.

Unlike the goddess Athena, however, art does not spring into the world full-blown.³ There is a journey the artist must take before his vision can call to those who look on his finished object.

That journey is the creative process.

¹ Buchanan, Scott (Editor). 1976. *The Portable Plato*. Penguin Books. New York, United States of America. Book X. Pp. 659-663.

² The term "man", as well as any masculine pronoun, shall be deemed, for the purposes of this text, to indicate both male and female genders.

³ Gardner, John. 1983. *On Becoming a Novelist*. Harper & Row Publishers, Inc. New York, United States of America. Pp. 136.

2. The Birth of an Idea

The creative process leading to the making of my novel "And the Sea Looked" started with a single idea, perhaps the *une ligne donnée* Paul Valéry⁴ speaks of: the one line of a poem given to the poet by God or nature, the rest which the poet has to journey towards himself.

While reading a book called "The Nature of Prejudice" by Professor Gordon W Allport of Harvard University,⁵ I found myself wondering whether the damage caused by people's fear of difference can move beyond race, religion and political creed.

Allport explores the origins and basis of prejudice from a mainly racial (anti-African-American), religious (anti-Semitism) and political (anti-Communist) viewpoint.⁶ He proceeds to show that, in his view, prejudice is a natural human condition; a basic way of living that allows man to psychologically cope with an overwhelming number of external stimuli.

Living as I was in a post-apartheid South Africa, trying desperately to cope with the vast changes that had swept the country in recent years, Professor Allport's book raised an important concern for me: how could people of different races learn to seek their own welfare and growth? Not at the expense

⁴ Vernon, P.E. (Editor). 1970. *Creativity*. Penguin Books Ltd. Harmondsworth, United Kingdom. 1980 Reprint. Pp. 68.

⁵ Allport, Gordon. W. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. United States of America. 1979, 25th Anniversary Edition.

⁶ *Ibid*, Pp. 17-28.

of their fellow man but, rather, in concert with them. How then, could we as ordinary individuals, living everyday lives, make a difference in healing the wounds of the past? Were these wounds even unique to South Africa, or were they present in the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world? The crimes of racism, religion and politics are not unique to South Africa: they are, like prejudice, a human condition.

According to Heather Coombs, the Romantic poets saw that man's only salvation lay in finding a deeper humanity. She quotes John Keats as saying, in a letter to his brother George, that "...very few [men] have been influenced by a pure desire of the benefit of others...".⁷

Allport says something similar.⁸ He explores the question whether man can sufficiently overcome his fear of difference to understand that not only is he a member of a microscopic in-group (whether gender, family, neighbourhood, nation or race) but to grasp that he also belongs to a macro in-group called humanity.

Can a universal philosophy of humanity, Allport asks, be fashioned before further wars - usually based on the inherent differences between people - break out and foster greater prejudice, more fear among humans who are, after all, the same despite external differences? Such differences are, to be sure, only the external imperfections of the Platonic Material World.

⁷ Coombs, Heather. 1978. *The Age of Keats and Shelley*. Blackie & Son Ltd. London, United Kingdom. Pp. 91.

⁸ *Op cit.*, Allport. Pp. 43-44.

Universal Peace is a noble, and appealing, thought. But where, I asked, could the search for the transcendence into the superior, Divine World, begin? Where was that utopian world of perfect forms where everything existed in an ideal state? How could diplomats and peace protestors seek to achieve "peace for our time"⁹ when individuals, unable to see beyond the Material World that makes the physical differences more real than the "oneness" of spirit existing in the Transcendental World, continued to find reason to hate and to fear anything less than homogeneous in their daily lives?

If we are to integrate a higher allegiance to the macro in-group called humanity into the collective unconscious and place it before any loyalty to micro in-groups such as family, gender, religion or race, where does the search for such a deeper humanity begin?

There is a Japanese theory of management called "kaizen"¹⁰: consistently small improvements ultimately resulting in tremendous gains. Did the answer, then, lie not in great feats of revolution or diplomacy that attempt to change the course of humanity instantly, but rather in the slow evolution of the human soul? Instead of breeding

⁹ The phrase "peace for our time" was spoken in September 30, 1938 by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in his speech given on the steps of No 10 Downing Street in the defense of the Munich Agreement, often misquoted as "peace in our time". Publisher: *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Peace_for_our_time&oldid=130862123

¹⁰ The word Kaizen means "continuous improvement". It comes from the Japanese words "Kai" meaning school and "Zen" meaning wisdom. [Masaaki Imai](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Masaaki_Imai) made the term famous in his book, *Kaizen: The Key to Japan's Competitive Success*. Publisher: *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Kaizen&oldid=133055658>

hopelessness and a sense of overwhelming helplessness in individuals by demanding that they make sudden changes, could the progression towards eliminating prejudice, and eventually wars, be more effective if individuals could hope that the way they lived their small, ordinary lives did indeed move mankind towards a transcendental humanity?

Willy Loman, the tragic hero of Arthur Miller's play "Death of a Salesman"¹¹, is not a hero in terms of Aristotelian tragedy:¹² he lives an ordinary man's life but he wants to perform great heroic deeds, unable to see that even within the smallness of his life he can transcend his humanity and thus become immortal. He cannot recognise that, as John Keats puts it, if we are "ambitious of doing the world some good"¹³ we must perceive this imperfect material world as "a vale of soul making"¹⁴ in which the pains of our ordinary lives can activate that spark of Divinity, that connection to the Platonic Transcendental World, where all is perfect.

Willy Loman's struggle with his ordinariness is such that many of those who meet him may scorn his dullness, but they do so because on some atavistic level they also recognise in him the banality of their own existence. Only his wife Linda

¹¹ Miller, Arthur. 1949. *Death of A Salesman*. Hereford Plays. Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. Oxford, United Kingdom. 1968 Edition with Introduction by E.R. Woods.

¹² "...as Tragedy is an imitation of personages better than ordinary men..." Bywater, Ingram. (Translator). 1928. *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*. Oxford University Press. Pp. 57.

¹³ Barnard, John. 1973. *John Keats: The Complete Poems*. Penguin Classics. London, United Kingdom. 1988, Third Edition. Pp. 548.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, Pp. 549-551.

recognises that "attention must be paid"¹⁵ to even this ordinary man.

It was Miller's portrayal of a universal issue ("what do men have to live for?") in an everyday setting which was at the heart of my idea: what if storytelling as an art could show wounded and lost individuals that the way to peace - between both macro and micro groups - lay not in the deeds of great men, but in the slow, small steps of individuals who can find a *kaizen*-way to cross from the imperfect Material World, full of strife and noise, into the Transcendental Divine World, where difference and prejudice is inconsequential.

I asked myself what the best vehicle for removing the emotive connotations of race, gender and religious differences in a story would be. A protagonist who is neither black nor white; someone who is effectively colourless.

Would it be possible to show that the way an individual with albinism chooses to live his ordinary life can be as vital to the evolution of humankind as the actions of the greatest politician or hero? That as much "attention must be paid" to the decisions and choices of this "little man" as to the decisions and choices of Presidents and Popes?

I started researching the genetic condition of Albinism and, with the help of an American organisation called NOAH,¹⁶ I contacted an African-American woman called VS.¹⁷ She was

¹⁵ *Op cit.*, Miller. Act 1 Pp. 39. Linda speaking to Biff.

¹⁶ **NOAH** : The National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation. PO Box 959, East Hampstead, NH 03826-0959, United States of America.
<http://www.albinism.org>

¹⁷ Name protected for confidentiality.

willing to share with me her experiences of prejudice in her daily life.¹⁸

Answering with great detail, she allowed me a glimpse of the "little" events which caused her the most pain and the most anger: in her answers she used phrases such as "I glared"; "I told him to F*** off". There was also a subtle paranoia: "Everyone stares at me", and defensiveness: "I'm unapologetic about who I am". She met hatred with hatred; anger with anger and aggression with aggression. And a common theme in those who showed her the most prejudice was the constant reference to God; to VS as sinner and/or the Devil.

The incident she related that hurt her the most arose when a male colleague befriended her, telling her "I like your style". Later, he sent a list around the office inviting everyone to his wedding: despite his protestations of friendship, VS was the only person not included on the list.

Was VS another tragic hero in the mould of Willy Loman? Was her life the link between the small calamities of hatred and self-interest in individuals and the great calamities of hatred and self-interest in the wars between nations?

Here was that *une ligne donnée* I needed to link the individual with the universal: take people living ordinary lives in the imperfect Material World (Elizabeth preparing for a wedding, Cathy hoping to find a friend, and May fulfilling her ambitions) and, in their interaction, show how they each

¹⁸ See Appendix A - Email questionnaire. Completed questionnaire not made available due to privacy of contents.

strive to attain the perfection of the Transcendental World (their ideal concepts of faith, hope and charity, where charity is that omnipresent Divine Love which embraces compassion for all other living beings).

An idea, however, is not enough to make a story. There is the rest of the poem the poet has to find for himself. Could I, trained in business and accountancy, find a way to actualise this story? In describing the qualities of a writer, Ernest Hemingway says that two absolute necessities for writing are talent and a real seriousness about writing.¹⁹

I did not know if I had either. I knew I wanted to undertake the long journey necessary to translate my abstract vision into a material form that would allow others to share in the alternate reality I had seen: one where we each can make a difference in our world in the way we choose to live our ordinary lives. But could I do it?

Before I could even begin to transform my ideal vision into a concrete form, there were two obstacles to overcome, namely, the questions:

- a. what exactly does creativity consist of, and
- b. what conditions would foster any creative potential I had?

¹⁹ Phillips, Larry W. (Editor). 1986. *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*. Grafton Books. London, United Kingdom. Pp. 18.

3. What is Creativity?

My view of creativity used to be synonymous with the Romantic image of a mad genius, hunched over his desk, waiting for that flash of Divine Inspiration which, when it descends, effortlessly results in a Mozartian symphony, a Wordsworthian ode or a Shakespearian play. Each work of art perfectly composed and immortalised in the annals of humankind's history.

But once I began to analyse the notion, this image did not sit comfortably in my business-trained mind. And how could it? My training taught me that self-discipline, mental orderliness and logical pragmatism was the route to achievement.

If, therefore, I did not fit into this role of "mad genius" as creator, could I somehow train myself to be creative? Was there still a way I could translate my single abstract idea - the transcendence of our differences through choice - into the form of a complete novel?

I first needed to establish what creativity was.²⁰ Was it:

- a. a skill that could be learned
- b. an innate personality trait
- c. a process that could be perfected or
- d. a flash of Divine Inspiration?

²⁰ Harnad, Stevan. *Creativity: Method or Magic?* Cognitive Sciences Centre Department of Psychology, University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton, SO17 1BJ UNITED KINGDOM. Downloaded from: <http://users.ecs.soton.ac.uk/~harnad/Papers/Harnad/harnad.creativity.html>

3a. Creativity as a Learned Skill

The plethora of "How-to-be-creative" books loading the bookshop shelves suggests that creativity - or at least the creativity necessary to write a novel - is a learnable skill. Stephen King²¹ in his memoir "On Writing" talks of an author's "toolbox", containing such "tools" as vocabulary and grammatical skills. He proceeds, like many authors of similar books, to advise the reader on the basic aspects of storytelling: technical skill in description, dialogue and character development, and he talks about his "re-write formula".

King, as a multi-published and financially successful author of horror and fantasy novels, is describing a mechanical process - a methodology - of creativity that places the role of author as secondary to a pre-defined set of requirements for writing a novel that will generally satisfy a large and uniform book-buying public: the mass market.

Janice Radway²² traces the beginning of this phenomenon to the early years of the nineteenth century. During these years, she states, the traditional view of writing a book and publishing it as a particular and individual process of creativity was challenged by an alternative view that saw the book-buying public reduced to a large, undifferentiated mass.

²¹ King, Stephen. 2000. *On Writing: A Memoir*. Hodder and Stoughton. United Kingdom. Pp. 81-105.

²² Radway, Janice A. 1984. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. University of North Carolina Press. United States of America. 1991 Edition. Pp. 21-24.

Books become "commodities", rather than "art", and can be "manufactured" by relying on repetitive and popular formulas.

Category literature - such a horror (Stephen King); detective (Ed McBain); westerns (Louis Lamour); adventure (Ian Fleming); and romance (Barbara Cartland) - do, arguably, rely on a formulaic approach in which the underlying ingredients of the novel don't change. For example, adventure stories would feature a common theme of a lone hero saving the world, while romances would have a hero and heroine falling in love against the odds. Even if the actual form of the novel mutated into a newer, more contemporary style, this essential formula would still be core to each category type.

Jay Dixon²³ suggests that a formulaic approach to writing a novel is less important than the way in which an individual author creatively works within the boundaries of the formula of his category. Radway, too, credits the success of the mass market novel to the important differences perceived by the readers of category novels, despite their overtly formulaic structure. These differences within the formula are usually to do with an individual author's "creative voice".

However, the readers, Radway states, want certain elements to remain the same. They have certain expectations of their genre of choice, irrespective of its repetitious or formulaic quality. If these conventions - such as a happy ending - are not met, the readers become dissatisfied.²⁴

²³ Dixon, Jay. 1999. *The Romance Fiction of Mills & Boon 1909-1990's*. UCL Press Limited. London, United Kingdom. Pp. 2.

²⁴ *Op cit.*, Radway. Pp. 49-65.

Thus, creativity might appear to be no more than the ability to learn the correct method of writing a story. I decided, logically, that the best way to write the novel I wanted, reaching a large (and lucrative) audience of readers, was to learn the formula of category fiction. Once established as an author with a marketable commodity, I would, by then, have learned enough creative skill to begin what I termed my "real" writing: that vision burning in my soul, forged in the fire of white South African guilt and a need to show that, as individuals, we each have the potential to transcend the imperfections of the material world.

My learning genre of choice was romantic fiction. I studied the guidelines for aspiring authors offered by the largest romance publisher in the world, Harlequin Mills & Boon (HMB). I devoured the obligatory "how-to-write" books. And I read as many category romances as I could.

There was, indeed, as Dixon²⁵ had admitted, a characteristic theme in the romances: love conquers all. However, equally clearly, there were differences between each romance I read. Each author had a distinct style, or voice, which gave the book either a spark that had me quickly turning pages or, alternatively, a dullness that left me uninterested in even finishing the novel.

This implied that, even within the constraints of a creativity based on a learned methodology, there was an added

²⁵ *Op cit.*, Dixon. Pp. 2.

factor needed to make one novel more powerful than another. Learning the formula, or fitting out a writer's "toolbox", was not, therefore, enough to develop my creativity. I needed to find that unique inner trait which, when blended with mere technique, would create the novel that would see me published, and ready to begin the journey towards completing the "real" story I wanted to tell.

3b. Creativity as an Innate Trait

A student of creative writing, says John Gardner,²⁶ must learn to guard against the perception that technical skill is sufficient to write a good novel. The most important lesson I had so far learned on my journey towards becoming a creative author was that there is more to writing any novel than the simple mechanics of writing.

In 1934, Dorothea Brande²⁷ identified creativity as having a dual function: "The unconscious must flow freely and richly, bringing on demand all the treasures of memory ... and the conscious mind must control, combine and discriminate between these materials."

Thus, although the skills of creativity can be learned by the conscious mind, there appears to be a preconscious knowledge, unique to each individual author, which is also required for creativity. This preconscious knowledge or, as

²⁶ *Op cit.*, Gardner. Pp. 81.

²⁷ As quoted in Geraghty, Margret. 1995. *The Novelist's Guide*. Piatkis Publishers Ltd. London, United Kingdom. 1997 Edition. Pp. 17.

Professor Jacques Maritain²⁸ names it, creative intuition, is natural to man; it cannot be learned. Lying latent in the individual's unconscious, and containing everything that is already given, creative intuition is an innate trait which will, when needed, emerge into the conscious mind in an imperceptible and imperative manner, compelling the personality to the creative act.

Creative intuition is connected to the totality of the individual and, through the power of technique, can be given direction during the creative process.²⁹ As an innate trait, this creative intuition is distinct from the Platonic Muse; it is a combination of both the *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge hidden in the domain of the individual's unconscious mind.³⁰

The product of this preconscious activity is not the need for mere self-expression without artistic form; it presents the drive to a logical formulation and representation of the sentient, responsive life that is the artist's vision of reality. The artist, in the process of creating, must objectively draw on this *a priori* "inner material", innate in his being and, using learned technical skill, transmute it into a work of art.³¹ He must also be a person who never forgets the *a posteriori* sensory impressions which he has

²⁸ Maritain, Jacques. 1953. *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. Meridan Books, The World Publishing Company. Ohio, United States of America. 1966 Reprint.

²⁹ *Ibid*, Pp. 98-99.

³⁰ *Ibid*, Pp. 66-67.

³¹ Storr, Anthony. 1972. *The Dynamics of Creation*. Penguin Books Ltd. Harmondsworth, United Kingdom. Pp. 182-184.

experienced and, in the process of making his creation, he must be able to recreate them with all the originality of his innate creativity.³² John Keats, in a letter to Richard Woodhouse in 1818, says that the "poetical character" must "have no self; it must be every thing and nothing"³³ as it draws from all around it and becomes that which it experiences.

Creativity thus appears to require not only a strongly functioning ego (or conscious mind) that is capable of judgement, persistence and control (the ability to learn skills), but also ready access to the realm of the psyche (the unconscious mind with its latent and innate creative intuition as well as its absorbed sensory experiences).³⁴

Love conquers all, as both the essential theme of category romances and as an *a priori* and an *a posteriori* individual experience, would surely be an easy enough subject to write on - a topic that was comfortable enough to be easily accessible from the depths of my creative unconscious as well as having a simple enough formula, allowing me to learn the technical creative skills I needed.

All that was left for me to do was to write my romance novel, preparing the way for writing my "real" novel.

³² *Op cit.*, Vernon. "The making of a poem" Stephen Spender. Pp. 70.

³³ *Op cit.*, Barnard. Pp. 547-548.

³⁴ *Op cit.*, Storr. Pp. 266.

3c. Creativity as Preparation

Chance favours the prepared mind.³⁵ Although Pasteur's famous dictum was aimed more specifically at scientific creativity, in terms of creativity as a combination of learned technique and the awakening of an innate trait, it could equally apply to artistic creativity.

And if indeed chance does favour the prepared mind, all I needed to do was perfect my creative writing technique, colour it with the originality of my own creative intuition and - *violá* - I would be able to establish myself as a best-selling romance novelist. If published as a romance author, I reasoned, I'd prove to myself that I was more than a business brain; that I did have the creativity necessary to transmute a single idea into a readable and marketable book. If unable to get published in even the apparently easy-to-break-into market of category romance, I would have to give up my dream of writing the definitive novel on prejudice and difference.

Eager as any other new novelist to get published, I set to work. My first romance, a love story of about 55 000 words (the technical formula) set in Africa (the creative originality) received a polite, but firm, rejection. I read this letter with a mixture of confusion and disbelief. Surely, my necessarily strong writer's ego³⁶ demanded, the editors of

³⁵ *Op cit.*, Harnard. Quoting Louis Pasteur.

³⁶ *Op cit.*, Storr. Pp. 51. Storr states "...the acquisition of the skills required to practice an art, or to transmute an original idea into comprehensible form, demands a strong ego, an actively executant aspect of personality..."

HM&B could see the brilliance of my technique? The latent talent just waiting to be called forth to create a string of romantic best-sellers?

The rejection letter told me that either I hadn't learned enough technique, or my creative technique was too unique to fit the genre requirements. Or perhaps it meant I was just uncreative. However, before giving up any idea of myself as Published Author I would, I decided, try again.

I took no chances of rejection with my next manuscript. Before submitting it to HM&B I hired the services of a professional freelance editor who had previously worked as an acquiring editor at HM&B. Her advice: re-write the whole manuscript. Dutifully absorbing all the hints and tips she had scribbled in the margin, I rewrote the manuscript and submitted it, only to receive another rejection.

And so it went on. Between the rejections and the rewrites I wrestled with the question of whether I was in fact a creative personality, or whether I had just not yet reached that point where technique and creative intuition combusted into creative genius; that magical point which in category fiction equated to Being Published.

This was not, by any means, a linear process. After each rejection, it would take me months to get to the point where I could write again. Each time I had to find a new way to deflect the blow to my ego; I had to build a new layer of psychological armour to protect myself from the ever

increasing pressure of working diligently, but with no visible advancement in the world.³⁷

At one point I stopped writing for over a year, only to, against my better judgement, find myself toying with a new idea for a romance. All the time, never fading, the idea of my "real" novel lurked in the background, waiting for the day when I would be ready to write it.

I would fill the time between rejections with reading more books on how to write. *The Passionate Pen*.³⁸ *The 12-Point Guide to Writing Romance*.³⁹ *Creating Character Emotion*.⁴⁰ On and on the list went, until eventually I thought I had made the breakthrough I needed.

I received an email from an editor at HM&B saying that she liked my story but it needed revisions. This manuscript had the formulaic elements necessary for a successful contemporary romance: a baby, a wealthy hero and a feisty, independent heroine. It also had originality: it was set in South Africa. And, she said, she liked my creative voice.

The effect of this request on my creative process was interesting. Previously I had taken between nine to eighteen months to complete a 55 000 word manuscript, (including rewrites). This top-level interest shown in my work made my confidence, and my creativity, soar. I believed I could do whatever was required of me.

³⁷ *Op cit.*, Gardner. Pp. 46-47.

³⁸ McAlpine, Rachel. 1998. *The Passionate Pen*. Hazard Press. New Zealand.

³⁹ Walker, Kate. 2004. *The 12-Point Guide to Writing Romance*. Studymates Ltd. United Kingdom.

⁴⁰ Hood, Ann. 1998. *Creating Character Emotions*. Story Press Ltd. USA.

In the space of eighteen months, I not only wrote the two sets of requested revisions, I also wrote two further manuscripts. I *felt* the difference in my writing: there was less anxiety about "Am I using the correct technique?" and more openness in allowing the story to flow onto the page without conscious intellectual control.

At last, I thought, I had reached that crucial point where technique, perfected through dedicated practice, blended effortlessly with raw creative intuition and took concrete form. I felt I was writing with authority, a strong voice that gave my writing a unique style⁴¹ that could not fail to capture the reading editor. I was wrong. All three manuscripts were rejected. Detailed letters of advice and words of encouragement about my talent - a far cry from that first, impersonal two line rejection - showed that I had indeed progressed...but not enough. Obviously, there was still something lacking in my creative ability.

3d. Creativity as Divine Inspiration

There is a Japanese folktale that Stephen Nachmanovitch relates in his book "Free Play : Improvisation in Life and Art"⁴²:

⁴¹ *Op cit.*, Gardner. Pp. 66-68.

⁴² Summarised from Stephen Nachmanovitch *Free Play : Improvisation in Life and Art* Pp. 1-3. Original tale translated by Trevor Legget in "Zen and the Ways", 1978.

A Japanese master musician came to play in a village. As he finished playing, the voice of the oldest man in the village was heard from the back of the room: "Like a god!"

The villager musicians asked the Master how long it would take a skilled player to learn to play as he did. "Years," the Master replied. So the villagers sent their most brilliantly talented young musician to be a student of the Master.

On his arrival, the Master gave the student a single, simple tune to play on his flute. The student quickly mastered all the technical problems of the piece, but all the Master could say was : "Something lacking!"

The student exerted himself in every possible way; he practised endlessly, but all the Master would say was : "Something lacking!". The student begged the Master to give him a new tune. The Master said "No." The daily play, the daily "Something lacking!" continued. The student's hope of success and fear of failure became ever magnified, and he swung from agitation to despondency. Finally, the frustration became too much for him: he returned to his village, ashamed and impoverished. For years he avoided the village musicians, eking out an existence teaching beginner's lessons on his flute.

One day, the village musicians came to him. They were holding a concert and wanted him to play. With effort, they overcame his fear and his shame until, almost in a trance, he picked up his flute and followed them. As he waited, no-one intruded on his inner silence. His name was finally called and, as he stepped out onto the stage, he realised he had nothing left to gain, and nothing left to lose.

So he sat down and played the same simple tune he had played for his Master all those years ago. When he finished, there was silence for a long moment. Then the voice of the oldest man was heard: "Like a god," he said, speaking softly from the back of the room. "Like a god!"

Like the hero of this folktale, after the final rejections from HM&B, I had nothing left to lose. I couldn't bring myself to write another romance, putting myself through the frustrations and despondency of yet more rejections, while not getting any closer to the point of doing my "real" writing. Yet neither could I accept that I wasn't creative enough to write the story I wanted to. It was time, I realised, remembering Ernest Hemingway,⁴³ to get serious about my writing and write what I wanted to write: the single idea of people living ordinary lives in the imperfect Material World striving to attain the perfection of the Transcendent World.

I re-read my notes and research materials that I had collected six years before on albinism and VS. And then I sat down and wrote. Two chapters into my novel, I knew I was in trouble. I was using all the technical skill I'd worked so hard at acquiring during my years of submitting romance novels to HM&B. And I was allowing my original creative ideas to take shape as they wished. But there was still "something lacking". Something, deep and fearful and previously unacknowledged, lying inside my psyche that was resisting my "real" writing.

In the creative process there is, says Michelle James,⁴⁴ a natural resistance to the transforming force of creativity. Creativity, by its very nature, births into the world something new. Such a potential is bound to meet a deep-seated

⁴³ Refer footnote 19. Op cit., Phillips. Pp. 18.

⁴⁴ Article Source : <http://ezinearticles.com/?Natural-Resistance-Within-The-Creative-Process&id=468868>

resistance to any internal change (of the self, of the identity: from rational business personality to "mad", irrational creative personality) and external change (if published how would the *status quo* of my life change?).

As the hard eggshell protects the unborn chick, this resistance is the psyche's way of protecting what is. And, in the same way that the resistance of the eggshell to the chick is hardest in the moment before hatching, so too is the psyche's resistance to change strongest at the moment immediately prior to the transformation of the identity through the creative process.

Reviewing the two dull chapters of my "real" novel I had written I had to make a choice: abandon my idea, ending the journey I had started so long ago, or identify and overcome my resistance to the creative process which would allow me, if not to write "like a god" to, at least, "shake hands with God".⁴⁵

My biggest resistance, I discovered, was not fear of failure, of being fated to remain an obscure and neglected author. Rather, my deepest resistance to my creative potential lay in the fear of letting go of all intellectual control during the process of writing. I feared disappearing utterly into the Transcendent World of the alternate reality I wanted to create in my novel. In surrendering completely to my art, in allowing some unknown force to work through me "like a

⁴⁵ Lee Stringer in "Like Shaking Hands with God: Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut and Lee Stringer" Pp. 52.

god", there was too great a potential that in undertaking the creative, and therefore transforming, journey towards my "real" writing, I would lose touch with the Material World, the world of my "real" existence.

Margaret Atwood⁴⁶ describes the creative process of writing as being a compulsion to enter into a dark underworld; to seek to illuminate this darkness and to, perhaps, bring something back into the light. In the darkness, a writer has to 'negotiate with the dead': and the dead do not always let the writer return to the safety of the upper world. There are the suicides: Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Ingrid Jonker. The addicts : Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Ernest Hemingway. And the mental illnesses of Plath, Woolf and Hemingway, to name but a few.

But it is this very darkness, this journey into the unknown realms of the creative psyche, that lifts a writer beyond the virtue of skill and, as Plato says, makes of him "a light thing, and winged, and holy".⁴⁷

Although Plato's Forms⁴⁸ are rationalist in character, and reasoning the leading principle of his philosophy, in *Ion* he describes the difference between an inspired poet and one whose art is a mere product of his technique.⁴⁹ It is when a

⁴⁶ Atwood, Margaret. 2003. *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*. Virago Press. United Kingdom. Chap 6 and Pp. xxii.

⁴⁷ Saunders, Trevor J. (Editor). *Plato: Early Socratic Dialogues*. Penguin Classics. London, United Kingdom. "Ion", Pp. 55.

⁴⁸ Refer footnote 1.

⁴⁹ Goldberg, M.A. 1969. *The Poetics of Romanticism: towards a reading of John Keats*. The Antioch Press Ltd. Ohio, United States of America. Pp. 28-38.

Divine Madness grips a poet that he becomes inspired. Untouched by the madness of the Divine Muse, believing that technique alone will inspire him, the poet's creative composition remains far short of the perfection of the superior Transcendent World.⁵⁰⁵¹

Although preferring reason and law as a proper function of man and ultimately banning epic and lyrical poets from his republic, because of the dangers of the irrational 'madness' which possesses them, Plato nevertheless states in *Ion* that a good poet, by Divine dispensation, becomes an interpreter of the messages of the gods.⁵²

It is only a poet capable of surrendering his reason to the Divine forces which move within him who can create work which is "like a god['s]". And Plato distinguishes these works from the poet who merely creates art as a product of his mind and his technique. "It's a much finer thing," says Ion, "to be thought Divine."⁵³

Thus, the poet gripped by Divine Madness finds - as did John Keats - that the journey into the psychological or spiritual *terra incognita* of his creative intuition is not so much a loss of his primitive, or lower, state of awareness, easily disturbed and thus distressing, as it is a journey into

⁵¹ Radice, Betty. (Editor). 1973. *Plato: Phaedrus & Letters VII and VIII*. Penguin Classics. Harmondsworth, United Kingdom. 1981 Reprint. Pp. 48.

⁵² *Op cit.*, Saunders. "Ion". Pp. 55-56.

⁵³ *Op cit.*, Saunders. "Ion". Pp. 65.

an intuitive awareness of some higher knowledge which is beyond the horizon of his consciousness.⁵⁴

Coming from a world more like Plato's republic, where solutions and achievements were firmly rooted in business reason and law, mental control was a vital part of my being. And I realised the core of my resistance to this deeper journey into my creativity lay in my fear that, in allowing an unknown part of myself - call it my soul, or my Muse - to take over my being, I would find myself (like my maternal aunt who committed suicide and my paternal grandfather who was an alcoholic) unable to "negotiate with the dead" and would come adrift in the dark underworld of my psyche.

However, there was an almost daemonic compulsiveness stirring within me. An inclination to - like The Fool in a tarot deck - leap blindly into the dark abyss. One day, without thought, without preparation, I sat down to write. I lost track of time. I wrote until I could write no more. I had three-and-a-half thousand words of a short story called "The Leopard and The Lizard".⁵⁵

Words that were layered and linked and flowing sweetly with ancient symbolism I knew nothing about on a conscious level. Exhausted, and not a little scared, I realised that, for those hours of writing, my conscious mind had not controlled me. Something had moved deep within me and this, *this*, was how the hero in the Japanese folktale had finally

⁵⁴ Gradman, Barry. 1980. *Metamorphosis in Keats*. The Harvester Press. Brighton, United Kingdom. Pp. xiii to xviii and Pp. 135.

⁵⁵ See Appendix B.

played his flute. With nothing on his mind but silence, he had been able to receive the messages of the gods, transmute them into his music and play "like a god".

In writing "The Leopard and The Lizard" I had negotiated with the dead and returned safely. All that remained was to foster the conditions that would allow me to fully explore the newly discovered terrain of my creativity in such a way that I could finally write my "real" novel.

4. The Conditions for Creativity

A farmer can plant a seed, but he can't force it to grow. He can only supply the nurturing conditions which allow the seed to actualise its own potentialities. According to C. R. Rogers, creativity is the same as this seed. The very nature of creativity makes it impossible to be forced or manufactured; it can only be nurtured.⁵⁶ To provide a nurturing environment in which my creative potential could be actualised to the extent that my single idea could be transmuted into the concrete form of a novel, I needed to recreate the conditions under which I had written "The Leopard and The Lizard".

I identified the differences in the creative conditions between the technically correct, but "something lacking", romance novels I had written, and the technically imperfect, but energetic, short story I had written as:

⁵⁶ *Op cit.*, Vernon. "Towards a theory of Creativity" CR Rogers. Pp. 146-151.

- a. To Worship Mammon or Apollo?
- b. Writing for Joy : Entertainer or Evangelist?
- c. A Metaphysical Conversation: Connecting with my Muse

4a. To Worship Mammon or Apollo?

"But, B.B., I think we should never be too pessimistic about what we know we have done well, because we should have some reward, and the only reward is that which is within us...publishing, admiration, adulation...are all worthless".⁵⁷

The words of Ernest Hemingway in his 1954 letter to Bernard Berenson are echoed by the Zen Master Osho. Creativity is the inner attribute of working with joy. In whatever one does, Osho continues, one must be uncaring of whether history, or even other people, take account of what one has done. Fame, and the desire for fame or reward, should not be a consideration if one wants to be truly creative. The fulfilment one finds in what one is doing lies in the task itself: any act of creation must be completed for the simple joy of having done it.⁵⁸

This, I realised, was a fundamental difference between my romance writing and the writing of "The Leopard and The Lizard". My early business training made me firmly goal oriented and my romances were written as a means to a financial end; they weren't a creative end in itself. I was

⁵⁷ *Op cit.*, Phillips. Pp. 104.

⁵⁸ Osho. 1999. *Creativity: Unleashing the Forces Within*. St Martins Press. New York, United States of America. Paragraph summarised from Pp. 91-107.

writing them as part of a logical strategy: 1. learn how to write creatively; 2. get published; 3. earn money; 4. proceed to "real" writing; and 5. carry on earning money from romance writing while doing "real" writing on the side.

Knowing that for certain top authors the romance industry provides a financially lucrative career, I was motivated not by the sheer joy of writing romance, a difficult art to conquer because of the dual requirements of writing within a formula *and* of finding an original voice within those constraints. I was, instead, motivated by the determination to recreate a financially independent career for myself in the same way I had had a financially successful business career. I also realised that, in emphasising the financial and other rewards of romance writing, it was more important to me to earn money than it was to allow my unique creative voice - or Muse - to work freely within me.

This mercenary drive probably, according to John Gardner, had its roots in guilt and shame at being financially dependent on my spouse while trying to establish myself in a field in which the financial rewards are notoriously elusive. However, Gardner continues, for the unpublished author to reach his full creative potential he should remove the added pressure of dependency by learning to accept that financial dependence on a generous spouse-as-patron is not only God's bounty, but also an excellent survival tactic. It then becomes the author's responsibility to honour this bounty by doing

everything in his power to write to the best of his artistic ability.⁵⁹

When I wrote "The Leopard and The Lizard", there had been no thought of external reward. It had been a case of writing for the sheer joy of writing. And the difference had shown in the writing itself.

Paul R. Givens, in his article "Identifying and Encouraging Creative Processes",⁶⁰ states that it is imperative that creative people do not continually find themselves in ambivalent situations, caught between the call of multiple goals. To foster creativity, a choice must be made. Thus, I was faced with making a choice. Did I continue to write romances? Or was I to put aside all thoughts of writing for the joint rewards of fame and fortune as a romance writer, and write as I wrote the short story: purely for the joy of it? In my journey towards writing my novel which god was I to worship: Mammon or Apollo? And did I want to be an entertainer or an evangelist?

4b. Writing for Joy: Entertainer or Evangelist?

Before I could make the choice I had to ask myself why I had started my long journey towards creativity. *Why* did I want to write?

⁵⁹ *Op cit.*, Gardner. Pp. 117-118.

⁶⁰ The Journal of Higher Education Vol XXXIII No 6 June, 1962, Pp. 295-301.

My desire to write had its roots in a post-apartheid South Africa. Not only did I, as a single individual, want to make a difference to the imperfect Material World in which we live, but I also wanted to show that every individual could strive towards achieving the deeper humanity the Romantic poets had longed for. I believe that, by taking small *kaizen*-steps, individuals can transcend hatred as an attribute of the imperfect Material World we live in and find its counterpart, Divine Love, in Plato's superior world of Ideal Forms.

By the time I had reached this stage of my "making of a novel" journey, humanity as a whole was living in a post-9/11 world. Suddenly, the issues Allport had raised about wars continuing until mankind's philosophy could embrace the concept that there was only one in-group, namely, the in-group of humanity itself, become relevant not only to the new South Africa, but to a larger group.

The post-9/11 world was reeling from more religious wars, and everywhere I looked there appeared to be a spiritual and religious crisis that was creating even greater divisions in humanity. Cracking facades of traditional religious ideologies were vying with an ever-deepening religious fanaticism and there seemed no way to transcend these differences.

In a similar way, the first and second generation Romantic poets had to witness the upheaval and destruction of the old order during the Age of Revolution (an era from

approximately 1789 to 1848).⁶¹ Out of this discordant world, fractured by the corruption of revolutionary ideals through an essential evil, evolved the Romantic poets' ambition to participate in the renovation of the world. Not through the heroic actions of national revolutions (the French Revolution) and wars (the Napoleonic Wars), but with the revolutionary emphasis shifting to the humble, the ordinary and the trivial events of the single individual's life. The Romantic poets saw the answer to the woes of their world as lying in a revolution of the individual human spirit where the virtues of faith, hope and charity - as *agape*, Divine Love - would be the bridge between the old, corrupt world and a new, ideal world.⁶²

Was love, then, the key to modern individuals finding a deeper humanity which would transcend the differences and ever-widening man-made divisions between individuals and nations as reflected by the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust, apartheid South Africa, 9/11 and its bitter aftermath? And had my worship of the god Mammon when writing romance novels blinded me to a deeper reason behind my journey towards creativity?

The Romance genre had love as its theme and therein, beyond my desire for fame and fortune, lay its appeal to me as both reader and writer. I am a romantic and an idealist to my

⁶¹ Hobsbawm, Eric. 1962. *The Age of Revolution: 1789 to 1848*. Abacus Books. London, United Kingdom. 1997 Reprint. Pp. 312-333.

⁶² Gleckner, Robert F and Enscoe, Gerald E. (Editors) 1962. *Romanticism: Points of View*. Prentice-Hall Inc. New Jersey, United States of America. 1970, Second Edition. Paragraph summarised from "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age" by M.H. Abrams Pp. 328-329.

core. Love can conquer all. Love as a theme is central to the romance genre, but love is ambiguous. There is *l'amour* and there is charity, in its archaic meaning of *agape* (Divine Love, or compassion.)

The Romance genre is all about *l'amour*: physical and emotional love creating a "oneness" between a man and a woman. In Jewish mysticism, the kabbalists see making love on the Sabbath as a special healing - a *tikkun*: in the act of making sacred love they experience the Self and the Other as the Divine sefirot (Divine potentials; planes of God made manifest in the material world). This physical act of love results in the complete union of male and female energies as they connect across differences without becoming each other.⁶³

But, strictly speaking, *tikkun olam*⁶⁴ means 'restitution' and denotes, *inter alia*, the restoration of the right order and a true union: the correction of our spiritual selves to be made whole again.⁶⁵ It is a fundamental vision of God restoring order to man-made chaos, and its significance lies in a Divine

⁶³ Rav Berg, Philip S. 2002. *The Essential Zohar: The Source of Kabbalistic Wisdom*. Bell Tower Publishing. New York, United States of America. Pp. 224-226

⁶⁴ Can also be spelt *tikkun olum*.

⁶⁵ In the novel "And the Sea Looked" the character Ted, when meeting Cathy for the first time, introduces himself as *Tikkun Enoch Didymus*: "Tikkun" to indicate his potential to allow Cathy, Elizabeth & May to be made whole again (to find a unity, a oneness, out of their individual spiritual inner chaos); "Enoch" symbolises the Archangel Metatron, once a human known as Enoch; it is said he is also the Liberating Angel, who led the Hebrews through the wilderness. Metatron acts as a bridge between the Divine & mankind. With the ability to help us know the true measure of things, when he appears to a person, he may console or inspire. "Didymus" means Twin, the Greek equivalent of the Aramic name Thomas - Thomas the Apostle was Jesus' brother, also the doubting Thomas. Ted/Enoch are "twins" in that they are the same divine soul energy, performing the same function (a *tikkun olam*) in the novel for Cathy, Elizabeth & May.

redemption by small steps, act by act, day by day, as each small act of Divine Love mends a fracture in the fabric of the imperfect Material world⁶⁶ (and note the similarity to *kaizen*).

This is a different kind of romance, and it reflects the motivation behind the poetry of the English Romantic poets. Wordsworth's poetry was persistently concerned with the possibility of transmuting personal sorrow into strength; with healing, through his poetry, those people in spiritual or soul distress. Wordsworth wanted, and called on his fellow Romantics such as Coleridge, to write poetry that was both prophetic and redeeming. Through their art, Wordsworth wanted the Romantic poets to both arouse their readers from the sleep of spiritual death and to reveal a new way of living, where man and nature and all the world around him co-existed in absolute unity of existence. Love, to the Romantic poets, was the essential good and is what could heal a world fractured by essential evil.⁶⁷

I realised that, while the physical and emotional love in my romance novels was one way of finding unity between different people and their divides, my short story "The Leopard and The Lizard" was *also* about love. A different kind of love: Divine Love, where essential good overcomes essential

⁶⁶ Sacks, Jonathan. 2005. *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*. Continuum Books Ltd. New York, United States of America. Pp. 76-77.

⁶⁷ Abrams, M.H. 1971. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, United States of America. Paragraph summarised from Pp. 134-140 and Pp. 292-294.

evil to become one when "from the soul itself [issues] forth/a light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud".⁶⁸

Love, then, was still to be my theme. But not love as entertainment. In the post-9/11 world there is, I believe, as much need for pure entertainment as there is for writing with a more serious purpose. As Margaret Attwood says, the view that art without a purpose can't be called art is an outdated intellectual mythology.⁶⁹ There is nothing wrong, she states, with writing books for the purpose of both entertaining a mass audience and making money at the same time. However, Attwood continues, the inherent value of any novel, whether commercial or literary, lies in the realm of the author's unique artistic "gift".⁷⁰

As my nine failed attempts at romance novels had proved, creativity was not merely a learned skill fused with an innate creative intuition, perfected through practice. The final ingredient in a successful creative text was to write with joy; to allow the presence of an unknown force to move within. In other words: inspiration as a gift to the author from the Muse.

I had met my Muse for the first time in writing a story, not about earthly love, but about the Divine or Transcendent Love: the oneness which, in some small way, helps essential

⁶⁸ Richards, I.A. (Ed) 1950. *The Portable Coleridge*. Penguin Books. Harmondsworth, UK. 1980 Reprint. "Dejection: An Ode" Lines 53-54.

⁶⁹ *Op cit.*, Attwood. Pp. 59-60.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, Pp. 60-61.

good to overcome essential evil and heals a tiny fracture in an imperfect world.

And, while there *is* purpose to be found in writing a romance novel which brings joy to both author and reader through the momentary escape from a harsh and disintegrating external world, it was not *my* purpose. In the same way that I wanted my novel's protagonists to act out the power of the individual to change the communal ideal in their personal encounters with each other⁷¹, there was a part of me, like Wordsworth and the Romantic poets, that wanted my novel to be a *tikkun olam*: a small act of redemption for a despairing world, even if only I was redeemed.

My Muse, I had discovered, was not a light-hearted lady. To me, as author, writing with joy meant accepting that my creative Muse was not a romantic entertainer, but rather a romantic evangelist. I had met her, unexpectedly, while writing "The Leopard and The Lizard" and, to write my "real" novel to the best of my artistic ability, I would need to converse with her once again.

4c. A Metaphysical Conversation: Connecting with my Muse

"From the soul itself must there be sent/ A sweet and potent voice".⁷² I had heard that voice when writing "The Leopard and

⁷¹ Jung, C.G. 1958. *The Undiscovered Self*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. England. 1996 Reprinting. Pp. 30-31.

⁷² *Op cit.*, Richards. Coleridge, "Dejection: An Ode" Lines 56-57.

The Lizard" and, according to Rudolf Steiner, if I wanted to consistently hear these whispers of the soul, it would be necessary to accustom myself to an inner silence. Through this still listening, I could then enter the temple of my Muse at will,⁷³ not as an aggressive invader seeking to conquer and control with the power of my mind, but rather as a passive receptacle of the "sweet and potent voice" of my Muse.

This ability to be receptive, without intellectual control, gives one negative capability: the capacity Keats described as being able to exist "in uncertainties, Mysteries and doubt without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".⁷⁴

Margaret Attwood talks of art as not only a craft, but a discipline in the religious sense: a vigil of waiting, the creation of a receptive spiritual emptiness and the denial of self.⁷⁵ When writing the romances, I had never actively sought the receptive stillness which would make it possible to converse directly with my Muse.

However, in writing my short story I took a different approach to how I wrote the romances. For the few hours it took, I created a silent environment by switching off all telecommunications (no telephone, mobile or email) and exchanging my laptop for a pencil and notepad. I put on a compact disc of the mantra "Om", believed in Hindu religion to

⁷³ Steiner, Rudolf. 1923. *Knowledge of The Higher Worlds and its Attainment*. Rudolf Steiner Publishing Co. London, United Kingdom. 1947 Reprint. Pp. 32-34.

⁷⁴ *Op cit.*, Barnard. Pp. 539.

⁷⁵ *Op cit.*, Attwood. Pp. 86.

be the absolute sound of creation,⁷⁶ and shut my study door. I was as free as possible to connect – as John Gardner had instructed,⁷⁷ without consciously questioning what or why I was writing what I was – to the voice of my Muse.

According to Rogers,⁷⁸ this psychological freedom, although an essential condition for creativity, can only exist when a creative person can create free from both internal and external judgements.

Society, in general, says Torrance, can be “downright savage” to creative thinkers, and thus an encouraging environment in which the artist is safe to freely converse with his Muse is essential. To sustain the creative process, or conversation with his Muse, the creative individual needs to both communicate his ideas without fear and to have his efforts recognised.⁷⁹

When writing my romances, I had a safe and encouraging environment. I am a founding member of an on-line writing group called “Romance Writers of South Africa” (RWSA). For several years I submitted my romance manuscripts to the group for critique. We would share advice and direction in the form of constructive criticism of each other’s creative work. Unsure that I had indeed heard the “sweet and potent voice” of my Muse, I submitted the short story to RWSA. The response was encouraging and enthusiastic.

⁷⁶ Cooper, J.C. 1978. *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*. Thames and Hudson. London, United Kingdom. Pp. 122.

⁷⁷ *Op cit.*, Gardner. Pp. 60-61.

⁷⁸ *Op cit.*, Vernon. “Towards a Theory of Creativity” CR Rogers. Pp. 148-149.

⁷⁹ *Op cit.*, Vernon. “Stimulating Creativity” ER Torrance. Pp. 361-365.

With the creative experiment of writing the short story, I had achieved the result I wanted. Now there were no further obstacles to writing my novel. I had discovered what creativity is, and I had identified the conditions that foster it. All that was left was "a novel in the making".

5. A Novel in the Making: "And the Sea Looked"

"Genius can make its own way," says psychologist Dr Anthony Storr,⁸⁰ but others, he adds, need help and teaching.

While I had discovered in myself, *inter alia*, a certain tolerance of isolation,⁸¹ with only two chapters of my novel written, I needed professional help and guidance to complete the creative journey of my novel.

One way of obtaining this was under the auspices of a university offering a Masters in Creative Writing degree. I explored various local and overseas universities who offered such a degree; I was concerned that the rigid structure of these courses would not provide the conditions necessary for my creativity to flourish. I knew my alma mater, the University of South Africa (Unisa), had not offered a Masters in Creative Writing degree when I had last studied there five years previously, but I approached them. The reply was that Unisa did not offer such a degree, however ... and in the

⁸⁰ Storr, Anthony. 1972. *The Dynamics of Creation*. Penguin Books Ltd. Harmondsworth, United Kingdom. Pp. 232.

⁸¹ Raudsepp, Eugene. *Profile of the Creative Individual (Part 2)*. Creative Computing Vol 9 No 10 October 1983 Pp. 196.

"however" lay the flexibility and essential creative freedom I sought.

In an open atmosphere of creative debate, my novel's working title was changed from "Albino Blues" to "And the Sea Looked", which gave the exact sense of the novel I needed. The sea and oceanic "oneness" was to be a vital symbol in the novel, and the word "looked" gave an essential ambiguity: and the sea looked, but how? Angrily? Judgementally? Sadly? The reader would have to decide.

Then, putting into practice what I had learned while writing "The Leopard and The Lizard", I wrote the third chapter of the novel and submitted it for review. I did not mention to my supervising professor that there had been a gap of over a year between writing chapters 1 and 2, and writing chapter 3. The professor's initial response was interesting: chapters 1 and 2 don't "flow" and need major work; chapter 3 "works well".

This was the validation I needed that I had finally melded all the essential ingredients of creativity into my own creative voice. However, the journey was not yet complete. Major plot revisions were needed to bring the first two chapters into line with chapter 3; and the rest of the novel had to be completed.

When I was plagued with self-doubt, I had the encouragement of the RWSA members to bolster my flagging spirit; when my technical abilities were not equal to the

task, I had the mentorship of my Unisa professor to both challenge my vision of the story and my way of crafting it.

Somehow, the story's journey progressed. The characters evolved into real people: individuals struggling to overcome prejudice both internal and external. Each step they took gave flesh, I hoped, to my original single idea, that Universal Peace (the end of all wars) will only be possible if individuals, through the power of their choices in the way they live their ordinary lives, strive to transcend the separations and imperfections of the Material World, ultimately finding a universal unity ("oneness") in the ideal love existing in Plato's superior, Divine World.

During the process of writing the complete novel, my original assessment of myself as unsuited to the role of "mad genius" creating an immortal poem or symphony in one stroke of a pen was correct. I found that my creative expression had to be a fusion of an innate creativity with learned skills practised regularly so that I could transmute the "sweet and potent voice" of my Divine Muse from an abstract vision into a concrete form.

In addition, I needed to write with no thought of fame or fortune to cloud my vision; my writing had to be more than entertainment, it had to have the potential to console or challenge the reader and, finally, I had to let go of any intellectual control in a safe, creative environment.

There were long months in which I struggled to make contact with my Muse. But the environment I was writing in was free of judgement and so - always - she returned to me and a few more chapters would be written, until finally I could write "The End".

My novel was made; my creative journey almost complete.

6. Conclusion

All that is left now is to release this concrete form of my creative vision into the world. There is an emptiness as I write these last words: an emptiness that is both joyful and melancholy. Joyful because, in allowing the power of my own creativity to move within me, my life has been transformed in ways I never thought possible when I first started this journey. Melancholy, because endings always contain the seeds of a new beginning. And new beginnings overflow with unknowns.

What will happen to my novel now? What new journey, if any, will it begin? My vanity, of course, will be pleased by the success of my novel both as part of the submission for post-graduate degree and as a commercially published novel for general consumption by the reading public.

However, such success, if it is forthcoming - and there is no guarantee of either - does not necessarily mean that I am a "great" author, or even that this is a "great" novel. As

John Gardner says,⁸² around seventy percent of those authors who first publish a novel in any given year never go on to publish another. Although this statistic is daunting, I will certainly attempt to receive and transmute the new idea calling to me in the silent stillness as I listen to the voice of my Muse. Thus, the end of "And the Sea Looks" means nothing more than that *this* novel is made. That the journey is as complete as I can make it. And, as the English poet Sir Stephen Spender says, now only one truth remains:

"Ultimately, judgement does not rest with oneself. All one can do [as an author] is achieve nakedness, to be what one is with all one's faculties and perceptions, strengthened by all the skill which one can acquire, and then to stand before the judgement of time".⁸³

* * * T H E E N D / P A R T B * * *

⁸² *Op cit.*, Gardner. Pp. 119.

⁸³ *Op cit.*, Vernon. "The Making of a Poem" Stephen Spender. Pp. 74.

PART C

"And the Sea Looked"

An Interpretation

7. Introduction

Both Time and Reader will, hopefully, one day judge "And the Sea Looked". Whatever their final judgement will be rests in their interpretation of the novel. This, in turn, rests on the skill with which I conveyed my perceptions of the single idea that motivated the creative process of this novel.

How did I, as author, capture the idea that Universal Peace (the end of all wars) will only be possible if individuals, through the power of their choices in the way they live their ordinary lives, strive to transcend the separations and imperfections of the Material World, ultimately finding a universal unity ("oneness") in the ideal love existing in Plato's superior, Divine World (Pp. 40, Part B)?

8. An Interpretation of Major Themes in "And the Sea Looked"

Embedded in this idea are the main themes of the novel:

- a) Nations at War versus Individuals in Peace
- b) Universal Unity: Destroying the Illusion of Difference
- c) The Power of Choice: *L'amour* versus Charity

8a) *Nations at War versus Individuals in Peace*

Continuous wars, changing only battlefields, justifications and eras, appear to be humankind's destiny. These nameless wars, and the resultant suffering of humanity, are the constant backdrop of "And the Sea Looked".

Newspaper headlines blare "*Crisis grows as Northern War crosses Border*" (Pp. 6). The priest, Father Murray, is always lighting candles for ever more soldiers who have died in The War. The War changes everything: May, a poor man's daughter, moves into a mansion (Pp. 24). Grace and May are attacked by rebels from a neighbouring land "torn asunder by The War" (Pp. 140). And the reader learns that Clyve's parents died in The War (Pp. 70; 178), as does Clyve himself (Pp. 288). "The War" is thus ambiguous and never fully defined. It crosses many generations, with no end to the human suffering war brings.

However, as this novel is written in a post-9/11 world, the reasons for The (latest) War are hinted at: "Why were they fighting?" May asks the army officer who has come to inform her of her grandson's death. "We needed the place ... but the rebels wanted their holy ground back," he says (Pp. 288). And May is drawn into the memory of other rebels, and another war.

There is a dual message here: war solves nothing and, in a post-9/11 world, the ironic decision to go to war for world peace will only bring more *human* suffering (not just the suffering of Americans or Iraqis, Christians or Muslims, as

micro in-groups, but suffering to humanity as a macro in-group).

In the build-up to World War Two, Neville Chamberlain's diplomacy failed, ushering in the second major world war in three decades. There was to be no "peace for our time". The mediaeval Christian Crusades were a holy war which today, a thousand years later, are reflected in the current upsurge in terrorism in the name of a Muslim "Jihad", or holy war. And in the aftermath of 9/11, Western aggression has not brought an end to war. If neither diplomacy nor aggression brings universal peace one has to ask: what can?

In my research for "And the Sea Looked", I felt that holy wars are not limited to nations. The constant reference to God and the Devil in the personal attacks on VS, the African-American with albinism, was an individualised "holy war" which resulted in very real human suffering for VS.

By juxtaposing The War against a small parish background in which hatred, hypocrisy and self-interest (Cathy, Elizabeth and May) struggle against universal peace (Ted/Enoch), the novel "And the Sea Looks" attempts to show that universal peace has to begin with the choices made by the smallest unit of a greater society: the individual living an ordinary life.

Cathy, betrayed in her friendship with Elizabeth, finally realises that her difference to Elizabeth is insurmountable. It exists and her albinism cannot be changed. In the physical, Material World, Cathy will always be separate from what is

deemed "normal" by a greater society. She has to make a choice.

She rails against Ted when he tells her we all (as individuals) write our own history. "I didn't write my history," she says. "I didn't choose this. I was born with it! Do you think any sane person will choose to suffer this if we could all write our own lives?" and Ted replies "It's your saving grace" (Pp. 250). Later, after she's seen the beauty in the world around her for the first time (Pp. 252), she hears "Ted's words echo in (her) mind. Cross or grace, Catherine, it's your choice" (Pp. 254).

And, finally, in the Garden of Remembrance, Cathy accepts that her difference is, through no fault or choice of her own, the cause of the "war" waged against her by those whom society deems "normal". Her albinism makes "tough and unrepentant women run from (her), screaming, 'Devil! Devil!'" (Pp. 46) and it has forever separated her from what she most longs for: love. With her surrender to the fact that neither her difference, nor other people's attitude to it, can be changed, she is forced into making a choice as to how she will live the rest of her life. "Only this time, I get to choose the colour of my freedom. Faith or doubt. Hope or despair. Love or hatred. Peace or war. Which will I choose for the rest of my life?" (Pp. 268).

Ted symbolises the Divine Force which is available to guide individuals in their quest for universal peace.

Representing the Archangel Metatron (once a human patriarch called Enoch), who led the Israelites out of the wilderness, the character Ted/Enoch presents humanity with an alternative to war. With his tattoos blaring "Faith, Hope & Charity" and "L-O-V-E" and "P-E-A-C-E", Ted/Enoch makes it clear that the individual is the key (Pp. 28-29). Cathy, Elizabeth and May all recognise Ted/Enoch as an "outlander", someone from a realm that is not the Material World, and their response to him leads them to their individual choices.

With the help of the prophets, the chauffeur Elijah and the priest Father Elisha Murray, Ted manoeuvres each of the characters into situations where they will have to make a choice that will enable them, or not, in the case of Elizabeth, to transcend the differences and categories (the in-groups such as gender, race, religion and nationality) which create The War between nations, neighbours or even, as with the inner struggle between May and Mayflower, within the individual.

By not recognising the macro in-group called "humanity", these illusions of difference, between nations or individuals, separate humankind from its highest potential for good.

8b) Universal Unity: Destroying the Illusion of Difference

Another important theme of "And the Sea Looked" is that of "oneness". There is a Sanskrit word, *deeksha*. Essentially,

this refers to a transfer of power channelled by one person to another. An initiate and a seeker will touch in a Divine Union (refer to *tikkun olam*, Part B, Pp. 32). Enlightenment occurs as a golden ball of Divine Grace descends through the crown of the head and activates the higher (Divine, or ideal) self.⁸⁴ The *deeksha* dissolves attachments to concepts set up by the mind (such as what constitutes normality and, for example, albinism as the opposite of normality) and cuts through the separations and imperfections of the Material World. *Deeksha* allows the individual to grasp that, essentially, there are no differences between us (we belong to one in-group called humanity). We are one or, as William Wordsworth would have it, "we have all of us but one human heart".⁸⁵

After the golden light of *deeksha* has descended, one comes into an innate understanding that in the superior, Transcendent World of Ideal Forms everything is one with the Divine Source. One comes to know that the cause of suffering in this imperfect, Material World (including the suffering caused by wars) comes from a sense of separation: from our better selves (for example, by illnesses such as depression or anxiety); from each other (for example, by prejudice against difference); from the Material World (for example, by the trauma of watching live televised images as a physical symbol of the success of our material achievements was easily

⁸⁴ Windrider, Kiara and Sears, [Grace. 2006.](#) *Deeksha: The Fire from Heaven*. Inner Ocean Publishing Inc. Hawaii USA. Summarised from Pp. 160-163.

⁸⁵ Gill, Stephen(Editor). 2004. *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems*. Penguin Classics. United Kingdom. "The Old Cumberland Beggar." Ln 146. Pp. 23.

destroyed in the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre) and, finally, from our Divine Source, or God (for example, by "holy" wars). But the grace received through *deeksha* allows the individual to realise that any sense of separateness is but an illusion of the imperfect Material World.

In "And the Sea Looked", the character Grace is enlightened. She is the ideal form of humanity made manifest in the Material World, seeing the "oneness" in all. She is against the hunting of animals (Pp. 85) and "Our hearts are one and the same, dear," she says to May. "Despite the unfortunate differences the world imposes," (Pp. 82). Grace knows there is another reality (her visions of angels and Jesus (Pp. 32-33) and she recognises Enoch not only as a separate being (one of her strays), but as a part of herself.

When May watches Enoch and Grace together, she cannot tell where one ends and the other begins (Pp. 136). She knows that Grace is at peace and, from within the duality (May/Mayflower) caused by her own suffering, she yearns for what Grace has, and despairs when she thinks that "one cannot learn such grace" (Pp. 84).

May has built a hard, ruthless shell around herself in an attempt to keep the boundaries separating her from others: from Beulah (Pp. 21), from Enoch (Pp. 74), from Harry (Pp. 124) and Harry's employees (Pp. 82). Her tragedy lies in that she seeks peace from her inner "war" (between May and Mayflower) in the wrong places. She places her faith in the

objects of the Material World, her possessions: the silver sugar shaker, her pearls, the mahogany cupboard and the trigger on the gun that "saved" her from her father's abuse (Pp. 183). She becomes incensed when Grace can find sympathy for the suffering of her abusive father (Pp. 241), for she cannot yet understand what Grace does: that, because we all belong to the same group called humanity, if one individual in that group suffers, even if as a consequence of his own evil deeds, so do we all. We are linked in pain and peace through our common humanity, not separated by our differences.

In much the same way that nations use war as an excuse to annex another's possessions in the vain hope it will bring a lasting peace (Hitler invaded Poland; America invaded Iraq), so May tries to annex Grace's position and possessions in the hope that she will find the peace that is in Grace. May does not recognise herself in the undisciplined war rebel, one of the four horsemen symbolising the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (one of which is called War). The rebel rips off her pearls, the Christian symbol of Christ as salvation or the hidden gnosis necessary for salvation,⁸⁶ and May recognises that "the young one's greed, his zeal to take what is not his, feeds his evil" (Pp. 142). She does not, however, recognize that the rebel is a mere reflection of her own attitude to Grace; that the peace she seeks will not be found through aggression.

⁸⁶ Cooper, J.C. 1978. *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*. Thames and Hudson. London, United Kingdom. Pp. 128.

Elizabeth, too, seeks an end to her inner divisions in the objects of the Material World. She thinks her peace will come through acceptance by those she sees as "high society". She shifts between seeing Christ, and all that Christ's suffering on the cross symbolises, as her saviour, and seeing Clyve and what marriage to him will bring her (acceptance and no shame) as her saviour. Elizabeth's need to become "one" with those she sees as "perfect" in this Material World leads her, despite her unlikely bond with Cathy, to ultimately reject her "oneness" with Cathy because of her physical difference to Cathy.

In the same way, Elizabeth rejects her chance to recognise Ted (Pp. 221) as her guide out of the wilderness of her inner suffering. Instead, Elizabeth rationalises her choices, both to retract her invitation to Cathy (Pp. 262) and in her decision to continue her affair with Simon (Pp. 176 - 177; 278), thereby cementing her own separation from what she seeks. She sees that "the others" have all failed her (Pp. 281), not that she has failed herself by making a choice based on her separateness from the pain her actions will inflict on Cathy and Clyve. Unable to acknowledge that she has the capacity to choose her own salvation, Elizabeth is left "without faith, without hope, without love" (Pp. 281).

Not by her own choice, Cathy is separated from a physical oneness with others by her albinism. Abandoned at birth by her mother, by the age of five Cathy is seen by the majority of

people, including the nuns who supposedly care for her, as evil, that is, as someone who is evil because of her difference. Cathy has been taught to believe that her difference makes her a sinner. Her hope of redemption lies in her longing for a love or friendship that will see her as "normal" and transfigure her separateness into oneness. It is Ted, bathed in "a beautiful golden light" (Pp. 268), who brings Cathy into an awareness that the oneness she seeks lies in *deeksha*: the activation of the Divine Self, at one with the Transcendental World of the ideal. Here love is neither *l'amour* nor friendship, but exists in the greatest form of all: charity.

8c) The Power of Choice: L'amour versus Charity

The epigraph of "And the Sea Looked" offers the well-known Biblical quote from 1 Corinthians 13 about faith, hope and charity, the greatest of these being charity. However, because "charity" has unfortunately come to be associated with alms-giving, modern Biblical texts tend to substitute the word "love". This ideal of charity as compassion for one's fellow humanity, arising out of a union with the Ideal concept of Divine Love existing in the Transcendental World, has further been corrupted by the Material World's imperfect interpretation of love as "*l'amour*": a romantic or erotic love between two people.

According to Osho, there are three possible interpretations of love.⁸⁷ The first is romantic or erotic love. This is *l'amour*, the physical and lowest form of love, as it is of the body and belongs in the Material World. *L'amour* contains only the potential of what love is capable of. This potential is partially fulfilled in the second form of love: Platonic love, or friendship. This is love of the mind, and still sees the other as separate from self. Finally, when love reaches its highest potential and becomes the love of the Divine or Transcendental World, it transfigures into charity: a Divine Compassion which exists beyond separateness.

In "And the Sea Looks" this ideal is what Grace represents. Her charity transcends all difference and brings with it peace (the opposite of war) and love (the opposite of hate). Grace chooses, in humble, ordinary ways, to live out her compassion, which draws others to her "like beggars wanting to touch the garment of a Master for their salvation" (Pp. 84).

Elizabeth recognises her oneness with her father (Pp. 277), but she cannot transcend her sense of separateness: her physical difference to Cathy is too wide an abyss for her to take a leap of faith. She keeps herself separate from Cathy in her derogatory references to Cathy's affliction (Pp. 6; 19; 62; 121; 165 etc). She cannot recognise what Ted offers (Pp. 174; 221). Finally, she chooses to reject any compassion she

⁸⁷ Osho. 1994. *Osho Zen Tarot: The Transcendental Game of Zen*. Gateway Publishers. United Kingdom. Pp. 14-15.

may have felt for Cathy's suffering (and therefore her own) and further chooses to drown her sense of separateness in a sexual relationship with Wiseman.

May's misunderstanding of what Enoch and Grace share - their oneness - arises out of her obsession with placing her faith in the physical: that which she can see and feel and touch. From the first, she recognises that this outlander, this Enoch, has something to offer her. Although May sees Mayflower as evil, Mayflower represents the innocence her father destroyed. That Mayflower still struggles to exist, to seek union with May and Grace and Enoch, hints that May has not lost all hope of finding peace within. She loses her way in her misunderstanding of charity. She sees charity as almsgiving (Pp. 78) and she misinterprets what Enoch offers her as an erotic longing for him (Pp. 195-198). "I love you, Enoch," May cries as she kisses him. "This is not love," he replies (Pp. 197).

May's visits to the clinic in which her comatose father has been lying since she shot him (Pp. 182-184) also hint that she contains the potential to choose charity, the highest form of compassionate love. It is only after she descends into real hatred by almost choosing to actively let Grace die (Pp. 243-245) and Father Murray brings the girl called Hope to May (Pp. 285-287) that May begins to be transformed by her choices. Although grudging and somewhat resentful, May's compassion is

finally born when Mayflower recognises herself in the battered and abused girl called Hope.

On the day of her grandson's funeral, May understands that, unknowingly, she has achieved oneness. When May recognises that Enoch, as Ted, has come to fetch her, Mayflower is silent (Pp. 293) and May's separation, both within herself and from others, has finally been transcended. She recognises Grace in Cathy (Pp. 295) and, in the Garden of Remembrance, joins Ted in the golden light which he once shared with Grace. May is now ready, both to love and be loved (Pp. 301).

If Grace represents the ideal form of charity, or Divine Love, manifest in the Material World as compassion, Cathy is the protagonist who has the most potential to achieve a state of grace. Because of her albinism, Cathy is excluded from any hope of oneness by virtue of her birth as a person with albinism into a "land of normality" (Pp. 203-204), where difference is equated to a sin that must be conquered. She is despised for her difference from the moment she is born, yet Cathy still seeks love. The old crone selling flowers recognises the importance of Cathy's faith and hope, giving her a bunch of flowers, "For still hoping," she says, "when you could be hating." (Pp. 207).

At first, Cathy seeks love in its lowest form: *l'amour*. In her ignorance, she misunderstands Sister Agnes's compassion and that love is doomed to remain unrequited. Then, on her

arrival at St Jerome's Parish, she sees in Elizabeth the potential for another kind of love: friendship.

However, unlike Elizabeth, Cathy does not ignore the messages of Father Murray and Ted. She almost, like May, misunderstands the love that Ted offers her as a oneness based on *l'amour* (Pp. 48; 158; 199). As they walk along the beach she notices that "the thrum of his body, so close to mine, separated only by a slice of air, is thick with the promise that it can be easily breached, making us, in an instant, one. But he is silent and separate, and so am I" (Pp. 158).

It is only after Elizabeth betrays the friendship Cathy seeks that Cathy reaches her full potential as an individual with the capacity to transcend difference to such a degree that she can show charity even to those she hates. Purified in the cleansing thunderstorm as she hides in the Garden of Remembrance at the foot of Grace's memorial, Cathy finally surrenders to the only oneness Ted can offer her. She embraces an inner union with divine compassion for both self and others, bringing an inner peace which, through the choices she makes, will spread outwards to transfigure all those who meet her:

I see in what he says much of what I've seen in those I've called both friend and foe. I am Elizabeth; I am Agnes; I am all those who, fleeing, curse me as the Devil. It is my immutable bond with them all: I, too,

have seen them as different, when the only real difference is whether the view was theirs or mine. Cross or grace, Ted said to me earlier, and until now I've chosen the cross and not the grace. (Pp. 267).

Cathy's victory over her separateness - her inner war - lay in her final choice, her decision to offer comfort and support to the ostracized Elizabeth at the funeral despite what Elizabeth has done to her (Pp. 299). She had experienced an inkling of what love could achieve when, living under the influence of Sister Agnes's compassion, she'd let "the arrows of their hatred fall dead to the ground", "smiling in love" at the orphanage girls until they started to smile back (Pp. 251). She had let herself hate again after Agnes's betrayal, and once again become divided from any hope of peace.

Now, as Cathy chooses to transcend her hate and anger to embrace Elizabeth with compassion, her influence spreads. Others slowly join her (Pp. 300) and, watching the new generation of grace live in Cathy, May, too, can consciously surrender her war.

Long before she realises it, May becomes one with Grace: from the moment she accepts the abused girl Hope, Father Murray calls her Mrs T, the title she'd longed for while Grace held it (Pp. 287). She now lives in Grace's cottage, not the mansion she so coveted (Pp. 7; 287; 292). She gave Elizabeth both her precious pearls (Pp. 4; 96; 168; 293) and her

mahogany cupboard (Pp. 27; 291) and, on hearing about Elizabeth's downfall, she offers all of the Templeton money she had previously begrudged Grace spending on others (Pp. 27;291). Finally, she dances with Ted/Enoch and lets herself:

... fall into his heart, that great heart of his which pulses deep within us all. And, even as the distant sounds fade into the silence of the golden light, I believe that this time, I am ready.
I am ready to love.
And be loved. (Pp. 301)

Thus, both Cathy and May, in the end, bring together all the major themes embedded in the single idea which motivated the making of "And the Sea Looked": that both universal and individual peace lie in the small, seemingly unimportant choices every individual makes in his daily life. "Choose well," the old chauffeur Elijah tells May, "and there will be no more sorrow" (Pp. 132).

When the individual is able to recognise that difference is merely an illusion, an imperfect reflection of a superior Transcendent World, peace becomes available to him if he consciously chooses it. And, because no individual is separate from others - we are one - eventually that inner peace will spread outwards until finally we can choose, as a species, to have "peace for our time".

9. Techniques used to develop the Themes

The fundamental aspect of a novel, says, E.M. Forster, is its story-telling aspect.⁸⁸ One of the biggest challenges in writing "And the Sea Looked" lay in avoiding proselytising and keeping the text as a story that engages the reader. Whatever judgements were to be made about this novel I wanted to be made from the reader's own interpretation of the text. Thus I used techniques such as ambiguity, symbolism, imagery, repetition and reflection in an attempt to convey the major themes without imposing any personal philosophy on the reader.

The uncertainty surrounding Ted/Enoch, with his "eyes as ambiguous as the sea that looks" (Pp. 34); the nameless War and the mystery of May/Mayflower are examples of the use of ambiguity.

Although many symbols are used to provide the reader with added depth to the novel, the most important symbolism relating to the themes discussed above are the white rose and the sea/ocean symbols.

A rose⁸⁹ corresponds to the Lotus symbolism (heavenly perfection growing out of the mud of the earth). Roses thus denote the attainment of perfection, unsullied fulfilment, rising from the muddy primeval waters to blossom above them.

⁸⁸ Forster, E.M. 1927. *Aspects of the Novel*. Pelican Books. United Kingdom. 1962 Edition. Pp. 33.

⁸⁹ Op. cit., Cirlot, Pp. 275, and Cooper, Pp. 141-142 and Tresidder, Jack (Editor). 1995. *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols in Myth, Art and Literature*. Duncan Baird Publishers. London, United Kingdom. 2004 Edition. Pp. 417-418.

The rose symbolises the soul, the chalice of life, the heart and love. The white rose, in particular, is the "flower of light", of innocence, purity and spiritual unfolding, while red roses can signify erotic love, passion and desire.

Thus, in "And the Sea Looked", white roses are the dominant symbol to avoid any association with the lowest level of love, namely, *l'amour*. Elizabeth's dilemma is captured in the tuberose decorating the fashion designer's shop that she visits with Carol Wiseman (Pp. 223): tuberose denotes dangerous pleasures.⁹⁰

The sea/ocean⁹¹ represents cosmic consciousness, that is, the original chaotic state from which all life emerges as separate. Inherent in that state is all knowledge, although that may be obscured by an individual's fear of the depths (of emotions). The sea/ocean as a symbol contains all potentials; the sum of all possibilities in manifestation.

Inter alia, the symbolism of the sea represents the ultimate reality, the totality of existence (the oneness) with which we all seek to merge - it is at the moment when the individual self merges with the infinite that enlightenment is gained (we are all one; we have a collective unconscious linking us to the "other"). Despite their apparent differences, all of the characters in "And the Sea Looked" are

⁹⁰ Marsh, Jean. 1978. *The Illuminated Language of Flowers*. MacDonald and Jane Publishers. London, United Kingdom. Pp. 54.

⁹¹ Cirlot, J E. (Trl Jack Sage) 1971. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Second Edition. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. London, United Kingdom, Pp. 241-242, and J C Cooper. 1978. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*. Thames & Hudson. London, United Kingdom. Pp. 121-123.

joined in oneness through the sea/ocean that dominates the background of their ordinary lives.

Jung suggests that the associative meanings of symbols are imprinted in the archetypes of the collective unconscious of humanity and are thus unconsciously, if not consciously, recognised even by individuals with no specific knowledge of a symbol's meaning.⁹² I therefore made use of imagery to convey additional meaning to many of the themes.

For example, the theme of oneness is shown in images such as the single drops of rainwater at first clinging, and then falling, from Ted's leather jacket to form "one harmonious whole" (Pp. 265).

Another example of imagery is of the stigmata, drawn in the round hole in Cathy's palm (Pp. 95-96), her wound when her rage first overwhelmed her (Pp. 100). The scar starts bleeding in her moment of enlightenment (Pp. 266) and is still bleeding when she goes with Ted to fetch May (Pp. 295), and as she makes her choice to show Elizabeth charity rather than hatred (Pp. 299). This image allows the reader to make an association between Cathy's suffering and her compassion. Ted challenges Cathy (Pp. 251) to seek a change in her inner attitude and transform her suffering into an ability to see her irrevocable individual trial (her albinism) as a grace, rather than as a cross. Cathy must learn to show her tormentors charity, not rage and hatred. Once she is able to do so, she carries the

⁹² Jung, C.G. 1963. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Fontana Press. United Kingdom. 1995 Edition. Pp. 380 & 412.

stigmata: the marks of Christ who, when crucified, could show the ultimate compassion and say "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do".⁹³

Repetition of phrases and thoughts is used to emphasise the commonality of human experience. One such example is: "I'm an atheist, for when has God ever been there for me?" Cathy thinks when we first meet her (Pp. 1). May thinks the same (Pp. 33). It is ironic that Elizabeth, the one character who chooses not to overcome her separateness, is a devout worshipper.

The relationship of the characters reflect each other, and the roles they play in the novel. There are the two prophets, Elijah and Father Elisha Murray. Elijah was the Biblical prophet who, when near death, was called on to hand over the keys of his priestly power to his chosen successor, Elisha (Pp. 142; 145). In the novel both prophets offer the protagonists signs and messages relating to the choices Ted/Enoch offers them.

Cathy's fallacious desire for friendship with Elizabeth, when Ted is offering her true (Divine) love reflects Elizabeth's desire for friendship with Carole Wiseman, when both Cathy and Ted offer her a better chance of finding what she is seeking. Grace is the ideal against whom Cathy, Elizabeth and May are measured. Cathy reflects Grace when she chooses to stand by Elizabeth - "It is what Grace would have

⁹³ The Gospel according to St Luke. Chapter 23 verse 34. King James Bible.

done," thinks May (Pp. 299). May reflects Grace when she offers the girl Hope a home, and takes in all the strays Father Murray later brings to her (Pp 287).

These reflections hint at the power of the individual's choices. Like ripples in a pond, each individual choice affects the world beyond the individual. If the individual chooses charity, no matter how hard that choice is, ultimately the world beyond will find universal peace.

10. Conclusion

It is my hope that this interpretation of "And the Sea Looked" can be but one interpretation. I will have succeeded in my task as creative author if, in time, this story has as many interpretations as it does readers. I would even, perhaps, substitute a thousand readers today for a hundred readers in ten years' time. And those hundred for one reader in a hundred years' time.

If that one reader can, upon closing this book, be inspired to change the choices he makes in his ordinary life in the hope that he can effect a greater change in the world in which he lives, then perhaps this small choice of mine - to take the journey called "And the Sea Looked: The Making of A Novel" - will come to mean that I, too, in my ordinary life, have helped heal the deep wounds of past prejudices, both in South Africa, and the world beyond its borders.

I will give the final word of this thesis to Satya Sai Baba who, I hope, speaks a universal truth when he says:

There is only one religion, the religion of Love.
There is only one language, the language of the Heart.
There is only one caste, the caste of Humanity.
And there is only one God, and he is omnipresent.⁹⁴

* * * T H E E N D / P A R T C * * *

94 Discourse of Sathya Sai Baba, Brindavan, 19 Jun 1974 Published by Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications Trust. Web posted at Jun 20, 2002.
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PART D

"And the Sea Looked"

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* * * T H E E N D / P A R T D * * *

"And the Sea Looked"

Appendices

And The Sea Looked: A Novel in the Making/Judy-Ann Croome/Student 318-919-8 381

Croome

From: ~~Vernice S~~ <~~vernice.s@jag.com~~>
To: theodora@icon.co.za
Subject: Re: Experience of prejudice against persons with albinism
Date: 30 March 1995 02:33

Hello:

Your message was forwarded to me by the President of NCUHL. I am the 1st VP, and am an African-American with albinism.

I have experienced prejudice from both Blacks and Whites. My Mother has also. She says my Father's side of the family did not speak to her for a very long time because they thought she had been with a White man and had his children.

What would like to know?

~~Vernice S~~

And The Sea Looked: A Novel in the Making/Judy-Ann Croome/Student 318-919-8 382

Croome

From: Croome <cheodora@icon.co.za>
 To: V... <V...@...>
 Subject: Re: Experience of prejudice against persons with albinism
 Date: 30 March 1988 14:16

Dear V...

Firstly, thank you for being willing to share your personal, and I am sure, at times, painful, experiences with me. All discussions will be treated as confidential.

As a writer my first priority is understanding what makes people 'tick', to try and look into their hearts and souls and then to express those individual, but universal, emotions in words that everyone can understand. Because I am working in a fog as far as the condition of albinism goes I may ask you questions which are too sensitive for you to answer; please just ignore them! (My husband says I have the tact of an elephant so... Jon! be shy to tell me to bug off !!!???)

You have my original message so I will not repeat my aims for the story, but will rather proceed with my questions: if you would prefer to just 'talk' in general terms rather than answer specific queries, please do whatever you feel comfortable with. If I'm not clear on a query, please tell me, and I'll try to rephrase my questions. Here goes!

I was most interested to read that you experienced prejudice from both blacks & whites.

1. Have other racial groups (e.g. Chinese, Mexicans, Jews etc) displayed prejudice?
2. What form did the prejudice take e.g. physical rejection, verbal abuse, harassment?
3. Is it isolated incidences, or is it a continual thing?
4. Do you think that prejudice from groups other than African-Americans is based on racial prejudice, rather than on your condition of albinism? Or is it a combination?
5. Can you tell me a specific incident (e.g. you went to a shop and someone said something)?
6. How did you feel at that time e.g. resentful, angry, hurt, sad, hopeless, ashamed etc?
7. Has anything occurred that has made you feel at peace with your condition?
8. Do you feel that the so-called 'normal' people of society punish you for not fitting into their concept of what 'normality' is?
9. If so, how do they do this and what do you feel towards them?
10. Do you ever feel that you can live a fulfilling life, that is, that your opportunities can overcome your condition?
11. Do you feel that your health condition limits you, or do you think that the circumstances of your life are defined by other parameters e.g. education, social position, job opportunities, personal dreams etc?
12. When you are in the company of people who do not have albinism, what happens?
13. Do you feel comfortable in such situations, or are you always conscious of your condition?
14. Are you conscious of your condition because of your own feelings or because of how the other group acts?
15. Do they act to make you feel an outsider?

16. Do you ever feel the need to be part of the 'in-group'?
17. Have you ever tried to become part of a group and not been accepted because of your condition?
18. What was your reaction?
19. Do you think your condition has irrevocably altered your personality? That is, do you think you would be a different person if you did not have the condition of albinism?
20. In what way would you be different?

You also mention that your Mother was subjected to prejudice, especially from your Father's family

1. Did that prejudice spill over onto you? that is, were you ignored by them, and how did you feel?
2. How did your Father react? And your siblings, if you have any?
3. How does your Mother cope? Does it affect your relationship with her, either positively or negatively?

I have just written these questions, off the cuff - as I mentioned I am groping a bit partly because of my ignorance about albinism, and also because I am searching for that special 'something' that will give me a focus - in other words, I'm waiting for the light bulb to suddenly flash brilliantly above my head and provide me with a direction for my story: the joys of the creative process I'm afraid!!!

Your replies might lead me to new directions, and I hope you will not mind if I follow up if necessary.

I would like to confirm, that all correspondence is treated as strictly confidential.

Finally, I would like to thank you again for the time and trouble you are taking to help me - it's appreciated!!

Regards
Judy

Judy Heinemann-Croome
EMail: theodora@icon.co.za

> From: V. S. <V.S. @ >
> To: theodora@icon.co.za
> Subject: Re: Experience of prejudice against persons with albinism
> Date: 30 March 1998 02:33
>
> Hello
>
> Your message was forwarded to me by the President of NOAH. I am the 1st VP.

APPENDIX B

THE LEOPARD AND THE LIZARD

by

Ann Victor

In the manner peculiar to the African bushveld, the blood-orange sun sinks quickly, dropping below the solitary line of akasia trees standing sentinel on the horizon.

Still the two men don't move. Not even when the cry of the first jackal sends blistering fingers down their spines, curling fear and anticipation into their bellies. They've waited many years for this night. Years that have passed too quickly - and too slowly.

A small herd of impala grazing at the edge of the camp look at them from careful eyes as the setting sun brushes the last warmth from the day. The black-haired man stands up abruptly, an unwilling smile finding its way to his face as the impala skitter gracefully away, seeking the safety of the dense bush beyond their view.

'Are you ready?' he asks. Almost without waiting for his grey-haired brother's nod, he picks up the drum, easily letting the heavy throb dance through his fingers in concert with the flickering fire at his feet.

'Stop now,' his twin says. 'You'll scare them away. We must wait.'

He nods and, regretfully, puts the instrument aside. They sit in silence, the fire dimming, their thoughts locked inside as they wait for the Great Watcher and her companion to arrive.

Time stretches and pulls, the very air around them twanging with the hum of hidden dreams and broken promises. Black John says bitterly, 'They lied.'

'They'll be here,' Grey John reassures softly, as was his wont. 'Don't give up hope.'

'I have no hope,' Black John sneers. 'Hope is for fools.'

'You don't mean that.'

'I do.' Black John shifts sullenly, hunching a shoulder against the rustling air. His brother is a fool and, as he'd promised years - or was it aeons? - ago, tonight will show Grey John what a fool he is. 'We should have killed them then.' He pauses, the fire reflecting the calculating gleam in his eyes. 'Perhaps we still will. Leopard pelts are in demand these days.' His fingers scrabble lazily in the dirt finding, and then sensuously smoothing, a small round pebble. 'The lizard is too small. It's useless.'

'Salamander.'

'What?'

'It's a salamander,' Grey John says patiently.

'Whatever.' With a sharp snap of his wrist, Black John spins the pebble into the glowing embers, enjoying the feel of his muscles rippling and the satisfying hiss as another log

collapses under the assault. 'There's no money to be made from it. It's too small to make a difference.'

'A single thread can make a difference to the cloth it holds together.'

'You're wrong.'

'We'll see.' Grey John finally stands up. There is no difference between the two men, save for the colour of their hair and a gentleness about the eyes Black John lost long ago.

Arching his arms back over his head to ease the ache of waiting, Grey John turns in a slow circle.

'We are born one;' he says, 'and we will die as one. Why have you fought it for so long?'

'The only thing I've fought is my way to the top.'

'She gave you the victory she promised.'

'The leopard gave me nothing. Whatever I got I worked for.' Black John pushes himself to his feet, his chin aggressively angled towards his brother. 'It's my success - not hers.'

'It's yours, alright,' Grey John murmurs wryly. 'But is it success?'

'What do you know about success? No one listens to your songs. No one even sings them. Yet, you continue to hope that they will. That's not success! Do you want to know what success really is?' his brother demands. 'I can do that,' he snaps his fingers, the click loud in the silence of the starlit night, 'and a hundred people will jump to obey me.' He

strides to the dying fire, kicking it to life again. 'Don't tell me it's not my success when you have nothing compared with me.'

'I have hope.'

'Fools have hope. It's all they've got.'

'It is enough.'

'For you, maybe.'

'For you too, if you'd let it.'

Black John has had enough. 'This is ridiculous. We've waited forever, there's nothing for us here. It was just a stupid kid's dream. A fantasy.'

'Why are you so afraid?' Grey John knows why. Watching a nightjar rise from the undergrowth with puffed feathers and an agitated trill, he wonders if his brother knows.

'I'm not afraid - I'm bored.'

'Not for much longer.' He dusts a hand across Black John's shoulder, nodding towards the path the little bird has flown from. 'They're coming,' he whispers and, despite his knowing, he feels the lick of anxiety burst into a flame of fear. Will tonight show Black John the way? Or is he lost until another age?

Then all thought is washed from his mind as the cicadas fall still, the air hovering tautly as they wait.

Into this dense silence the Great Watcher comes, paws puffing up plumes of dust in an even greater silence. The rosettes on her pelt are dark and perfect, a hundred and more

eyes, staring in every direction, seeking, watching, carefully cataloguing every tiny corruption in the hearts of men who promise friendship and deliver only lies.

It's her cold liquid eyes, though, which draw the twins closer together as she pads with easy grace towards them. Dark yellow shards look contemptuously at Black John until he stutters accusingly, 'You're l-late.'

Settling herself in the centre of their makeshift boma with all the feline grace inherent in her species, she slowly, with delicate roughness, rasps her tongue over her pelt. She sees how Black John's eyes greedily scan the perfection of her skin.

'Where's the lizard?' he asks. She ignores him and, with a lazy suddenness, unsheathes her claws, apparently intent only on capturing the last hidden burr knotting her fur and marring her beauty.

It annoys Black John, as she'd known it would.

'We've waited forever for you to come.' He slants his fists into the pockets of his trousers and, in his foolish arrogance, takes a step closer. 'When is the lizard arriving so we can begin?'

'Salamander,' the other one says quietly, drawing her suddenly wary eyes towards him. 'How many times must I tell you that?'

The grey-haired, silent one makes her nervous. He makes her question her dark power - she's not used to that. As he

swivels his head to look at her directly, she knows tonight will test her to the full.

'Greetings, O Great One,' the quiet man says. 'I've looked forward to this night.'

A shiver slides through her body. She stops playing, determined to show him the full force of her strength. Then he will worship her. Then he will fear her, and desire her, as his brother - a man too eager to taste all this life has to offer - does.

Lifting her lips back from the teeth that could easily tear his throat out, she lets the growl echo out of her jaws, proclaiming her greatness to both those who can hear, and those who choose not to hear, the danger hidden in its seductive promise. The ground beneath her paws trembles, and she is pleased.

Black John pales, stepping closer to the fire, wiping his palms down the sides of his trousers. As if that will save him, she smiles secretly, when the time comes for him to pay me.

'That was...impressive,' Grey John says.

She grumbles a snarl at him, not trusting the mildness in his voice. Over the years, she's placed temptation after temptation before him and always he has that same look of resolute meekness about him. The one that makes her wonder where he gets the strength to withstand her, and all that she offers him. It's the lizard's fault.

As if her thoughts conjure the creature up, it scampers into the clearing. So ugly compared with her. So little, she can crush it with one paw.

'You're late, Lizard.' She hates that she sounds as petulant as Black John.

'Salamander,' Grey John corrects, and starts towards her.

She half-rises, the multitude of black eyes rippling into watchfulness over her muscled haunches, bunched now in readiness to strike any threat Grey John offers. He passes her by, and she sinks uneasily back into the dirt.

Gently picking up the cold, small body of the reptile, he says, 'I'm glad you came.'

The salamander scrambles up his arm to lie panting on his shoulder, looking down at her with eyes that have endured much. Its tail cupping Grey John's neck like a lover's sweet hand unwilling to let go, the creature says, 'It's time. Who shall begin?'

The leopard stands up arrogantly. 'It is my right.'

'Says who?' Black John objects.

'Be quiet,' she says, staring at him with casual cruelty in her eyes. 'Tonight you finally belong to me.' His gaze falls first. 'Sit,' she orders, and Black John drops like a ripe marula berry to the ground.

'Many cycles of the moon have passed,' she begins, once Black John stops wriggling his legs to find a comfortable position, 'since we four last met. You were both black-haired

boys, identical in nature and in form. Each of you, so full of pride, felt the fire of longing within.' Her whiskers twitch; anyone who doesn't know her could think she's smiling fondly.

'It amused me,' she continues, 'to see you so sure of your purpose. So certain of what you would do, and of what you would not do in your noble pursuits. You were both so young then.'

Her words whisper the memory, drawing the others in with her until, once again, they stand poised on the edge of a doorway into time...

'Psst! John, do you see that?'

'What? Where?'

'Over there, above the rock in the sun the lizard is lying on.'

'Do you see it?' His fingers fumble a bit in his eagerness, for he's never shot a leopard before. He'll earn a fortune if he can kill it cleanly. He recognises the moment the other boy sees it, because he freezes, reverence replacing the sweaty fatigue on his face.

'That...that's the most beautiful animal I've ever seen,' his twin chokes, fear and longing vying for supremacy in his voice. 'Don't kill it!'

'Are you mad?' he whispers back. 'Of course I'm going to kill it! I want its skin - it'll pay the cost of the bike I've been saving for.' As he speaks, he lifts his weapon to his

shoulder, fear and nerves forgotten as greed hooks into his heart.

He also forgets that, here, in the busy stillness of the bushveld, the cocking of his weapon is an alien sound. Before he has time to sight the barrel, a mighty roar, like nothing he's ever heard before, rents the air. In a frenzied instant he could never afterwards recall, the leopard stands over him, her fetid breath clogging his nostrils, her great paws keeping him sprawling helpless in the dirt.

'Did you think to destroy me?' the leopard mocks. 'You, of all puny creatures?' The heat of her scorches his skin, until slowly, slowly, a chill seeps through his frigid body, quenching the torment in his soul.

Then his brother says, 'I will kill you, if you don't let him go.' The sound of metal scraping on metal makes the leopard swivel her head towards him where he stands to their left. She looks at him carefully, measuring the coolness in his eyes and the steadiness of his hand, and she knows he'll kill her before she can reach him.

'Put the gun down,' she purrs, 'and I'll give you anything you want.'

He looks at her in silence, his finger tightening on the trigger.

'Anything,' she whispers, and sees a flicker of temptation bite as the barrel of his gun dips minutely.

'How?' the boy asks. 'You're just an animal.'

'Are men not animals too? I know your secrets and I have the power you seek.'

'Don't trust her,' a thin whistle from somewhere over to their right warns. 'She'll still get you in the end.'

As the reptile speaks for the first time, a flash of anger tarnishes the dull yellow of the leopard's eyes.

'What does such an ugly, little creature know?' she asks, not wanting to lose her hold on him. 'You will live in opulence and power; you can have it all. Money. Wealth. Control. All that they can buy. Just put the gun down.'

The boy looks at the leopard, her ivory teeth scoring scarlet pinpricks across the skin at his brother's throat. He sees the strength in her shoulders; the beauty of her pelt and the power in her paws. He knows he doesn't want to kill her.

Then he looks at the reptile; at its cold, shiny skin; its scrawny legs and even scrawnier tail, and he wonders what use such a tiny creature could have in this world.

'What about my brother?'

'He gets nothing. You get it all.' She sees the hunger rise in him, and dips her head so he won't see the triumph in her eyes. 'Do you want it?'

'Don't listen to her!' the foolish boy under her paws cries. She stops his protest with a quasi-gentle bite, turning the pinpricks into rivulets of red pooling stickily in the brown dust beneath his neck.

He groans, and lies still. His twin shifts his feet restlessly, the gun in his arms getting heavier. He doesn't know what to do.

'Lizard, will the leopard kill me if I put the gun down?' he asks.

'I'm not a lizard. I'm a salamander.'

'Whatever.' He shrugs, his soul already dreaming of the riches the leopard promises.

'Refuse the leopard. I will give you something better.'

'What can be better than being successful and rich and having everything I want for all of my life?'

'You decide.' The salamander slithers awkwardly down the rock, and stands next to the leopard. 'Look at me,' he says modestly. 'I am small, and weak, compared with the leopard and all she can offer. But I can give you what she can't.'

'What is that?'

'Hope,' the salamander says. 'I can give you hope.'

'Hope?' The black-haired boy, still as entranced with the leopard's beauty as at the first moment his brother pointed her out, is disgusted. 'What use is that?'

'In dark days to come, hope can be your torch.'

'Listen to the salamander!' the trapped boy begs.

He has seen into the leopard's dark heart. When she so casually - so easily - tears the skin at his throat, he knows with absolute certainty, that if his brother chooses unwisely, her provocative promise will doom them both. In that instant,

every hair on his head turns cold stone grey, the colour of the salamander waiting so patiently for an answer.

The leopard sees the boy waver, the gun barrel beginning to lift again. 'Let your brother take the lizard's gift,' she offers generously. 'You can have my gift, if you promise to come back here when the star of love kisses the moon once again. Then we will decide who has best served their purpose.'

'What happens to the one who can find no purpose?' the salamander chimes in.

'I'll eat him, of course.' Her head tilts with an inner amusement, and the leopard stands back, freeing the boy she's captured. She lies down with elegant ease, majestically folding one foreleg over the other, watching him cough and clutch his throat still bearing the marks of her teeth. 'Then, for all eternity and beyond, he will be mine.' Looking at the boy with the gun, she says. 'Make the promise.'

'I promise,' Black John agrees, knowing with the leopard's gifts to use as his own he is a certain winner.

'I promise,' Grey John cries, hoping he'll have enough time to convince Black John that all is not as it seems. He stands up. Moving to his brother's side, he says, 'We'll be here,' and tugs his brother's arm, pulling him back into their civilised lives, leaving the leopard and the lizard - no! salamander, he reminds himself - where they belong, deep in the primal bushveld....

'...and so you left us here,' the leopard ends her recollection, 'to start your life's journey. To find your purpose, using only what we each had given you.' She pauses, sensing Black John's rising excitement. 'Do you remember your promise and what it meant?'

'Yes,' Black John says confidently. 'Whoever lost tonight would become yours for eternity.'

'Are you afraid of losing?

Black John's laughter howls through the night, stopping even the hyenas as they gnaw their way through yesterday's bones. 'How can you even doubt that I've won? Grey John is finished. You can have him,' he says callously. 'I'm tired of his endless whine. I'm not giving up yet,' he chants in a parody of his twin's voice. 'There's still hope.' He snorts rudely. 'Hope? When even a blind man can see he's just a loser!'

Grey John merely smiles, stroking a tender hand over the salamander's body. 'There will be no loser tonight, brother,' he says and, with a sigh, lowers the little creature onto a rock. 'Goodbye, old friend. Thank you.' He is certain the salamander winks at him, before scurrying away into a crevice in the rock.

For a moment, he stands still, gathering his strength inwards. Then he squares his shoulders, swinging round to face the leopard, which has moved closer to Black John. 'Take me,' he says. 'Give him another chance.'

'No,' the leopard snarls. 'You'll be the death of me yet.'

'Would that be so bad?' Grey John asks mildly.

'Yes. It must be him. He's been mine for an age.' And she looks at Black John with such hunger, such greed, he trembles in shock.

'What's going on?' The thready sound emerging from his throat doesn't sound like a cry of victory, he thinks. 'Why does she want me when I've won?'

'Oh, you fool!' The leopard's laughter draws the circling hyenas closer and closer. 'Do you not know yet?'

'Know what?' Black John's breath hitches in his throat.

'I've had you all along,' the Great Watcher says, her eyes glittering with ferocious triumph.

Deep in their voracious depths, Black John finally sees the bitter truth. His life means nothing - nothing at all. It has always been without purpose, without meaning. He's betrayed the better part of himself, not for gold, but for dross.

He turns empty eyes towards his brother. 'You always had hope.' He swallows dryly, his prominent larynx bobbing up and down like a half-eaten apple discarded by children tired of their party games. 'But I had none.'

Grey John's heart clenches painfully at the sight of his brother's tears. He's seen it coming for years. The

disillusionment. The loss of all that he thought he was. And yet...

'There is always hope,' he murmurs softly.

'Is there?' Black John asks him. 'Even for me?'

His brother doesn't know it, but Hope is already alive in his eyes. 'Especially for you.'

'What about her?' Black John squints at the leopard pacing endlessly round the fire, the swish of her tail almost choking the steadily burning embers into darkness.

'Leave her to me.'

The leopard sees him coming and, with all the wrath of one who knows her time is over, she strikes. Once again, she has Grey John by the throat.

This time he's expecting it. Digging his hands into her neck, he keeps the scent of her at bay. In a lascivious parody of fleshly union, they twist and turn, edging ever closer to the flames, which leap and roar into new life - even as they wait to consume.

Knowing it is the only way, Grey John boldly steps into the fire, the leopard still clasped to his breast. He holds her there, until defeat and pique fill her eyes. With a sinuous twist, she drags herself from his hold, running yowling into the bushes, ash and burning embers staining her once-beautiful coat.

'You should have killed her!' Black John accuses, as his brother stands up, unharmed by the devouring flames. 'Now how can we be safe from her false promises?'

'I will keep you safe,' says Grey John, and, as he speaks, his shape begins to shift. Before Black John's appalled gaze, he changes into a salamander.

'Grey John!' he cries. 'Don't leave me!'

'I will never leave you, my brother,' the salamander comforts. 'Fear not, I will sustain you for I am always in you,' and he darts off into the night, leaving Black John alone by the dying fire.

For a long while he stands dazed, and a little bit frightened, until the chill of the night penetrates his trance.

He is one again, and the time has come for him to leave this place. It is time for him to begin to record simple songs long forgotten - the kind that bring joy and hope to a despairing world. Songs that will fill his life with purpose.

As he bends to douse the last of the fire's embers with the dregs of his coffee, his reflection in the shiny steel mug captures his eyes. No longer as black as the night, every hair on his head is now an irrevocable cold stone grey.

*** T H E E N D / APPENDIX B ***